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Florida

by
**Robert
Halsted**

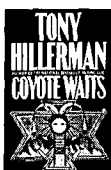
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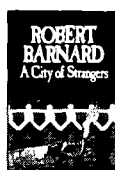
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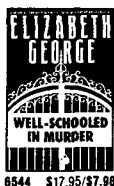
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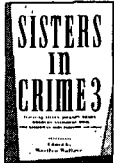
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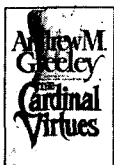
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Often, in this column, we mention new authors whose stories we are presenting in a given issue of AHMM, either authors who have never been published before or those who have but not in our magazine.

This time around, the only new-to-us author is Prosper Mérimée, whose "The Blue Room" is our Mystery Classic. Monsieur Mérimée (1803-1870) is perhaps best known for his novel *Carmen*, on which Georges Bizet based his opera.

Though we don't have any *really* new authors to present in this issue, we do have several nearly new ones. Wayne L. Tappan is back with his second story, "Good at This Sort of Thing," as is Albert Bashover, who brings us "A Souvenir of Rumania." And there are third

entries from New Zealander Geoffrey Hitchcock ("This Old House") and from Linda Evans ("Have You Herd?").

That makes us very happy. As we mentioned in the Mid-December issue, one of the things we enjoy most about editing AHMM is discovering new writers. And it is gratifying when they go on to become regulars in our pages.

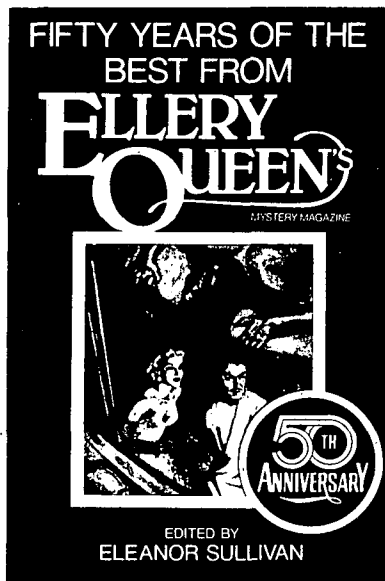
We have been thinking about all this lately in connection with our annual getting together of the list of Fish award candidates. The Robert L. Fish Memorial Award was established after Bob Fish's death in 1981 to recognize outstanding first mystery short stories. (Of the seven annual awards given, stories from AHMM have won five.)

(continued on page 66)

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It Was a Hot and Stormy Day

—by Robert Halsted—



It was a hot and stormy day. I was headed west on Alligator Alley, and soon I'd either be driving into the sun or fighting a spell of rain and lightning.

Ordinarily I like hot and stormy days. The sun shines till

the sand is too hot to step on barefoot, then the thunderheads start building up inland and climb hand over hand till they're leaning over the coast, and when they're about ten billion feet tall, black and blue and laced with silver, they turn

into an elemental display some love and some fear but none can ignore: great forked branches of blue-white lightning that collapse into a cannonade three times the size of any feeble northern thunder, sheets and curtains and waterfalls of silver rain that can flood hundreds of square miles in minutes.

Then it's over as quickly as it started, the wet foliage turns gold in the sun, and if you look eastward where it's still storming you may see a full earth-to-earth rainbow, even a double and part of a triple, in neon colors against an indigo-velvet backdrop.

But this day I was in no mood for grandeur and beauty, and would have rejected any that crossed my path. I only wanted the thunder and lightning to symbolize my rage.

I'd got up early to drive to the east coast, sun glaring in my eyes, for a conference with a possible client unable or unwilling to discuss details and arrangements by phone or letter. After waiting an hour and a half in her office, surrounded by a snippy, bilingual-at-best receptionist, thank-you-for-not-smoking signs, and back issues of *Ad Age*, I was dismissed in a curt five minutes. Never even opened my portfolio. Middle-aged freelance artists are not easy to sell unless they can exhibit their wares.

I'd even worn long pants, as I often do when meeting new prospects, and they were really beginning to crowd me. Hell of a way to spend my birthday. I could've spent the time and energy baking myself a fine cake instead. Double fudge on devil's food. I was beginning to get hungry from skipping breakfast.

So steeped was I in self-pity and a generalized grudge against the planet around me that it took me a moment to see, and another moment to register, a stocky brightly-clad figure staggering along the edge of the pavement. I veered into the left lane, hit the brakes hard without skidding (thank you, Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd. and Monsieur Michelin!), and pulled onto the shoulder just past her.

I'd realized before I finished the maneuver that she wasn't drunk or drugged, but badly injured. Her blouse was torn half off, and she was holding her shorts on with one hand. The clothing wasn't red, but the blood on it was. She had a flip-flop zori on one foot and nothing on the other; her face was a bloody mess, her lips split and swollen.

My first thought was, my God, I don't want to see the ones who couldn't get out of the car. My own blood doesn't particularly bother me, so long as it

isn't running out too fast for safety, but other people's really upsets me.

She was panicked, near shock apparently, and a little hysterical. Before I could check her for missing parts, she wailed, "I can't find Phammy!" She had to repeat it three times through her damaged lips before I understood her. God, I thought, if she looks like this the child's bound to be dead.

"You better sit down before you pass out," I told her. I led her to my car, opened the door, and sat her on the passenger seat. I knew I had to keep her in her Adult lest she break into complete hysteria. I poured a plastic cup of icewater from the jug on the floor and put it in her hand.

"Is Phammy in the car?" I asked.

She tried to shake her head, winced in pain. "No, *Phammy*. They phthole the car. I heard him meowing in the phwamp."

"Do you promise to sip this water slowly and stay conscious till I get back?"

She nodded a tiny painful nod. I marched down the shoulder, snagged my long pants getting across the barbed wire barrier, and headed toward the slough of sawgrass and scrub cypress. I understood myself, subject to revision, to be looking for a cat.

"Sammy?" I called in a boyish

falsetto. Every few steps I stopped to listen. I was anxious to get back to the girl, who could possibly die of shock, or who could space out totally from the emotional shock, on top of all else, of losing her cat in a gator-infested swamp. It seemed like an hour, but it was probably only a couple of minutes till I heard a small mew among the sawgrass.

It took all my tracking skills and generalship, but I finally cornered Sammy, up to his elbows in warm juniper-water and surrounded by sawgrass, and he seemed glad to surrender. He was half-grown and solid black, and pretty miserable-looking—sopping wet and full of burrs—but before we got back to the car he was purring furiously and trying to kiss me on the mouth. My arms were bleeding from sawgrass cuts and I nearly neutered myself getting back across the barbed wire with my arms full of cat, but we finally arrived alive, less like conquering heroes than the remnants of a defeated army.

She tried to get up, collapsed back onto the seat. I handed her the cat and she broke down into the wracking sobs of a lost child. Sammy was puzzled by the blood but tried to comfort her while she held him with both arms wrapped around him, like a teddy bear.

There was enough breeze up

on the road that the big 'Glades mosquitoes chewing on me drifted back to the slough, so I decided to interview and inventory her there.

"Can you talk a little?"

"Nn-huh."

"Do you think you have any serious internal injuries?"

Pause. "Ngk-huh."

"You had car trouble?"

"Ran out of gaph." It's about a hundred miles between filling stations on the Alley, and nobody tells you.

"Somebody stopped to help you?"

"Nn-huh. Red pickup. Had a gaph can in the back."

"Then they beat you up and stole your car?"

"Nn-huh."

"Rape you?"

"Ngk-uh. Tried. Kicked one in the ballv. Thatph why they beat me up."

I looked her over as best I could. Nasty cut on the forehead, just under the hairline. Face badly swollen, going to be terrible color tomorrow. Nose bloodied. No front teeth missing, but lips as described. On her face, blood mixed with tears, blood mixed with nosedripings, blood mixed with drool. Clothes bloody, arms and legs cut maybe from barbwire and sawgrass when she ran, body bruises already beginning to show. I poured some icewater on my dingy wrinkled hand-

kerchief and swabbed her face a bit, mostly for morale.

"First thing we need to do, baby, is get you some medical attention. Then we'll report it to the law." I rolled the windows partway up to keep the cat in—I'd paid to have the AC taken out of my rusty but serviceable old Subaru—and headed west toward Valencia Beach. I took her to the ER at Southwest General, as the closest medical facility, and there were miles of red tape. She had no I.D., no insurance papers, no cash. I've been burned by strays often enough that I hesitated, but since this was obviously a compelling situation, I offered them a check on my bank in Palm City. My being from Mosby County, a whole forty miles north, scared them a bit, but we were already in the door and she had a case number so they grudgingly accepted my good offices as the path of least resistance. I was a little upset to learn that the typical ER currently has about a hundred buck cover charge, Band-aids extra, but the whole bill only amounted to a week of mowing lawns if I didn't get a decent assignment soon. They looked like they wanted to admit her but didn't think I could afford it.

Poor Sam was cowering under the seat and half-dead from the heat (I'd parked in the shade

of a low, wide, coconut palm, but it was still hot), so we swabbed him in icewater and went on to the sheriff's office for more interminable procedures. Happily, the rain finally hit about that time, and we no longer had to worry about Sam cooking in the car.

In the sheriff's office I learned she was from Pennsylvania and that her car, a blue hatchback Honda, was taken by two men, one with a beard and one without. We left there about supertime with the understanding that the girl, who said her name was Milliphant Phmith, was a criminal for being robbed and beaten and I was an accessory after the fact for bringing her in. It's a bad trip to be treated with suspicion, hostility, and interminable bureaucratic tedium when you're the wronged party trying to comply with the law. When you lose your I.D. papers, you lose your status and credibility, and anybody who helps you is suspect by association. We took with us a strong impression that if they ever got around to looking for them, they didn't expect to find them.

We hobbled through the decreasing rain back to the car, having given my address to both the hospital and the law in default of any local address for her. She claimed to have no family and to have left up north and come to Florida looking for

a job. Suspicious maybe, but people do it—I did it, and I'm okay—and she wasn't asking for any special favors, just to record a crime as specified in their job descriptions.

I'd been getting madder and madder since lunchtime, which I hadn't celebrated. Mad at criminals, the medical industry, and law agencies, chronologically if not in order of importance. Also at myself for getting involved. If she and the cat hadn't been so pathetic-looking, I could've got mad at them, too. I'd forgotten that my original mad was at ad agencies.

I drove us to the nearest fast-food franchise and ordered something almost edible at the drive-in window. She couldn't do much but suck at an insipid chocolate shake through her swollen lips, pinching off little bits of stuff from the burger, one for her and one for the cat. As soon as my blood sugar was up enough for my brain to resume functioning, I started a mostly one-sided conference.

"I know you're up the creek here, Millicent," I began. "I'll do what I can to help you out, but my resources are limited. I can lend you just about enough to get back north on a bus, or take you to the Salvation Army shelter, or see if they have a Traveler's Aid in this part of the country. We might could

cook up a story, or maybe we wouldn't have to, and get you in the abuse shelter for a while. I can make phone calls for you to friends up north, or your family if you've suddenly remembered you have one." She unconsciously hugged Sam tightly. "And I can keep your cat for you for a few days."

Her eyes were filling up, and I knew they'd overflow any moment. They were blue, but I could've sworn they were light brown when we were in the sheriff's office. If she started weeping at me, I was going to run away screaming.

"Look," she began, struggling to get the words past her battered lips. "I'm honest and I don't have any diseases and I don't like to be where I'm not welcome. I can take care of myself in three or four days. I don't think I can right now." Sam moved off her lap and sat on the floor tunnel between us, washing up after his feed. "If you can put me up that long, I'll pay you, as soon as I can, what I've cost you. And my thanks and prayers for your help."

I thought back over early experiences: a hitchhiker in a cold rain who ate me out of house and home—at a very tight budget time—for the following six weeks. Adele, who showed up on my doorstep and eroded my faith in womankind. Maybe this girl was underage, what-

ever she said and however old she looked, and setting me up for an eventual Rapo or badger game. All kinds of cynical, mildly paranoid, and, I suspected even at the time, unworthy thoughts.

Before I had an answer ready, she added, "I'm lost and I'm scared and I don't trust anybody in the world right now but you." Boy, talk about knowing what buttons to push. I didn't think then, though, and I still don't, that she was trying to manipulate me. Just stating her case with a simplicity Patrick Henry could envy.

Sam stretched his neck toward me, stared me in the eye (I was carefully looking down instead of at Milliphant's face), and went "Maow!" with an undeniable pleading tone.

We both broke up. I looked at her, in obvious need of nursing care. The rest of her face was too colorful and lumpy to read, but her eyes—at least the right one, which wasn't beginning to swell and close—had a true-blue, all-American honest look.

"I suppose I seem pretty grudging," I admitted. "If I quoted W. C. Fields—'No good deed goes unpunished'—would you understand I've had some regrettable experiences in the houseguest department? Okay.

"So—I live in an abandoned house at the end of an abandoned island, and there's a

lumpy folding couch in the living room. The guest room has no bed, and it's full of junk storage. Okay?"

"Beautiful. I can phweep floors and things in a day or two. Kind of a gesture at earning my keep." She tried to smile, and held my hand in a very sweet, totally nonseductive way. Her nails were badly broken. I began to feel pretty good about letting her stay.

I made her lean the seat way back and try to rest. Sam got back in her lap, leaning uphill on her, and I drove up the Trail at an easy pace rather than take the Interstate. We passed through Palm City, took a left off the Trail, and eventually ended up at the foot of Live Oak Key. I was glad to see that no disasters had taken place at the cottage: They had everywhere else I'd been. The girl and the cat were asleep, and I left them in the car till I could get a place ready for her.

When the linens were on the folding couch, I ran a few inches of hot-enough-to-stand water into the tub, went back to the car, and carried the cat in while she leaned on my arm and limped along. I found a beach towel for her to wrap in after she'd half-soaked, half-sponged. She just barely managed to get back to the living room, and I made her sit in the recliner while I took care of some things

they'd overlooked in the ER—binding a toe that was turning purple, witch-hazeling her grass-cut legs, trimming the snags off her broken nails. A couple of them had bled. I bet she'd put up a good fight.

I put her on the good side of the folding couch, put a light cover over her, and told her I'd have to make a short trip for supplies tonight or in the morning, not to worry if I was gone for a while. I put Sam beside her, and she looked so much like a hurt child I impulsively kissed her on the unbandaged part of her forehead. She squeezed my hand, tried to smile, and fell asleep before I turned out the ceiling light.

I'd been going to bring her a glass of milk, but since she was asleep I poured it for myself, with about three and a half fingers of rum in it.

The day had done something to me. I'd seen a girl or two with a black eye, but never before a battered woman covered with blood and disabled. I knew intellectually that far worse than this happened every day, but experientially this was a first for me. I felt shock, outrage, horror, and a sort of instant hatred that there were people who could do this, running loose on my planet.

An idea began to form in my head.

I lay awake late, tossing and turning and thinking, and woke before the sun. After I'd fed myself, I put on medium-clean shorts and a fresh shirt, left a note and a fresh vacuum carafe of coffee for Miliphant, fed Sam some odds and ends, turned the answering machine on, and drove up the island.

I went past the shopping center, turned onto the mainland road, and stopped at Shrimptown, just before the bridge. Most of the fleet was in, waiting for the shrimp season to get up enough steam to feed them—even at three hundred dollars a box for net run, ice and diesel and even a small payroll can eat up a light catch real quick. Fortunately, Jim Pierson was aboard the *Mary Jo*. In the old days he'd been a cop up north—a rough cop but a fair one—before he turned shrimp. He wasn't fired from the force for being rough, he was fired for being fair.

All I meant to do was ask him to evaluate my idea and give me some suggestions, but before our two-hour talk was over, I'd recruited him and he'd volunteered a couple of his friends. After our talk, I was experiencing a state of mind that Friedrich Nietzsche might have felt: a complex of intellectual exaltation and animal power, melding into a metaphysical feeling

that the path I was on was appropriate, just, and sure.

It took some coming down to do my shopping at Fred's Foodway and General Store—a few groceries to fit an invalid and her cat, a toothbrush and female supplies, a few size-free garments like stretch-terry outfits, one-size-fits-all panties, a loose shift, and a beach robe. I was sure I was overlooking something obvious, but at least this would legally cover her. I didn't bother with makeup right then. Thelma—Mrs. Fred—checked me out herself, so I invented a cousin from up north who had lost all her luggage in a car accident and just got out of the hospital. No real full-blooded lies to remember.

By the time I got back, the girl was up sitting on a pillow at the dinette.

"My God!" I blurted out before I could stop myself. There was hardly a square inch of her that wasn't swollen and ghastly colors. One green eye looked out from the battered face.

"That bad, huh?"

"I'm sorry, honey. That wasn't good manners. You just sort of look like you got hurt a little."

"It dove phmart a bit. It only really hurtph when I laugh."

I began to think there was a sense of humor behind those tattered lips that could be fun after she healed. I nipped over to the grove, in the lee of the

Indian mounds past the deserted Big House, and found a few early and a few late oranges. I figured she needed lots of Vitamin C, and better than frozen concentrate, which is what Floridians normally drink instead of orange juice. Before long I laid out a soft breakfast—soft toast, soft scrambled eggs with bacon crumbs, and my Dixie-style grits are naturally soft. She got an amazing amount of it into her, including a pint or more of the fresh juice.

After we'd eaten I put the bathroom stuff in the bathroom and the kitchen stuff in the kitchen, showed her the bag of wearables, apologized for shortcomings, and told her I'd be out on nature-photographing expeditions on and off over the next few days.

The first trip, I scouted out the territory alone. Taking large-scale maps covering altogether close to a hundred sections, I checked out the most likely side roads first. I had fishing tackle sticking out the back window in case I needed to explain my presence to an especially territorial cracker: "Friend of mine told me there's a good bass pond back here, if I got the right road." As it happened, I didn't see a soul.

No luck the first day, except I did locate the exact spot where it happened, down to the tire-

tracks of the vehicles (I wished for my Junior Detective Plaster Cast Kit), and recorded the nearest milepost and marked it on the map. Only a certain number of feeder roads would lead the criminals past this point, if they were locals, which we suspected, and unless they were ranging far and making a profession of it. The best guess was that they lived near, far enough back in the woods for their truck not to be easily recognizable to regular travelers and the occasional-at-rare-intervals highway patrolman (rumor* has it that stranded motorists have starved to death waiting for the FHP to come along the Alley).

They would be sociopathic, white-trash swamp rats (I didn't miss a word when Milliphant was talking to the deputies) who had simply found an attractive woman—I assumed she was fairly goodlooking before they got to her—in an attractive car, both unprotected.

I was too tired to cook after all that traveling, so I showed up about dark with a bag of fried stuff from the Island Fish Market, takeout division. If she wasn't greaseproof enough to handle it, I could share it with the cat and poach her something. But she peeled the worst of the greasy breasting off and consumed a substantial amount of small bits considering her

condition. Sam ate everything we put down for him, greasy breading and all. Sea air does wonders for a cat's appetite.

I'd left the answering machine on, and one of the messages was from Jim Pierson. I called him as soon as we'd eaten—he plugs his boat in dockside between trips out—and got an earful.

"Got some good stuff for you, Walty boy. Listen close. First, there's an unofficial landfill, neighborhood dump dating way back, on County Road 922, 'bout a mile and a quarter off the Alley. Access from State Road 869, turn north between miles sixty-four and sixty-five, then east on 922 less than half a mile. Toby and Terri flew over it today with a map. Got all those numbers?" I repeated them. "Okay, the *interesting* thing about this dump is that there's on it a car that's been stripped and burned, but could have been a Honda hatchback, and definitely was blue. Apparently a kinda dull or metallic blue. No tags. And it's all by itself on the back side, tracks up to it, like it drove itself in, nothing on top of it."

"Hey, wow, somebody's been busy!"

"Stop interruptin' me, son. Next item, same source, is three miles east. A mile and a little more straight north off the Alley on County 919, and take a

sand road about a hundred yards west.

"Major feature of this location is a cracker shack, real white-trash affair with junkers in the front yard and all. One of the vehicles is an apparently functional Ford pickup, oversized tires, 'bout a 1975 model give or take a bit. Dull dirty red and rusty, Florida tags. Gas can in the bed. Think that might help?"

"Jimmy, I don't believe you and your flying squad. What kind of gas can?"

"Glad you asked that. Three to five gallon round, old dull galvanized, bent and battered. No handle on the bail. Believe it?"

"I assume Toby was at the wheel. Tell me all about Terri."

"Got her start birdwatching, they say, and those are good glasses. I've seen the feathers on a pelican halfway to Shell Island with 'em. She also navigates for him on crosscountry events. Day *and* night."

"Jim, I think I gotta go freshwater fishing tomorrow. We may put Janie on the next day."

"She'll be there. She's got a girl to cover for her, and she has a very personal motivation. You ever notice some of her teeth ain't quite the same color?"

"I get you, boy. Hear from me tomorrow."

"Tin-foe."

The exhilaration came back,

along with a flash of fear. If I found what I was looking for, I was gonna be some scared when I found it.

I went back to the girl, and she had a paperback propped on a pillow in front of her. I realized she must be getting a bit bored, and for a brief moment I felt slightly guilty about not having a TV, which I understand to be one of the major social sins of our time. She patted the arm of the recliner. I sat down, she took my hand, and I just talked at her for an hour or more, she mumbling and nodding occasionally. I told her she'd hurt worse tomorrow, then start getting a lot better, and all about some of the picturesque local customs such as flounder-gigging and vivisectioning the English language. Then it occurred to me to try talking her into letting me get some color shots of her for documentation. I had a fancy automatic borrowed camera loaded with high-speed color film.

At first she wanted to say no, but I explained that if they were caught this kind of documentation could persuade a jury to keep them out of circulation longer and maybe protect someone else.

"Just imagine! Me—a model," she quipped. "This isn't for the porn market, is it?" I took the shots—not porn style, mostly face and arms—with a bounced

strobe flash for true color.

We chatted a bit longer and said goodnight. I kissed her again on the undamaged spot on her forehead. She said she bet I'd never kissed a face like this before, and I answered that she'd probably never had a face like that before. I went to my room and fell asleep before I finished adjusting the pillow.

Next morning I woke early and double-checked my photographic gear. My borrowed camera was an auto-advance, auto-everything SLR 35 with an excellent zoom lens. I'd never buy a camera like that for myself—I have an old Leica and a Rollei that could've covered the Nuremberg trials—but on this specialized job it would do things I needed to do.

I drove down I-75 and onto the Alley. Following the marked maps, I located the dump with very little trouble once I'd covered the intervening miles. Pulling up on the far side out of sight of the road, I saw the shell right where Jim had said.

First I took a few camera shots playing with the zoom from different angles; then I examined the machine up close. It had gone to the graveyard on its own feet as the marks in the damp sand proved. There were muddled footprints, rough male shoes. Could be anybody. The maker's plaque identified it as a Honda, and the serial number

was still legible. I recorded it. I rubbed a finger inside and out for soot, looked for rust. It had been burned since the last heavy rain, which meant within a couple of days past. Any nearby forest ranger tower wouldn't be manned here in the rainy season, but the exact date wasn't that important.

I looked in where the back seat had smoldered its life away—there were some possibly identifiable scraps of stuff, but nothing to salvage, in the trunk space. In the glovebox, less burned than the rest of the interior, were the usual junk and some partly burned papers. I carefully carried these to my car and bagged them.

There was an ineffable sadness to the whole procedure. This was beyond any doubt the girl's car, a possession she had enjoyed, washed and waxed, gone to fun places in, and it had been taken from her life. It didn't officially affect me, but I felt my sinuses swelling as if I were suppressing tears.

All this time I'd had a small irrational fear that the culprits would sneak up behind me while I was studying their crime, but of course it didn't happen. I went to my car and drove almost back to the Alley before I checked my map. Double back at the next crossover, four miles or so east, another U-turn, first county road to the right, look

for a sand road to the left a little over a mile in. I started rolling, played with the odometer, and in a few minutes I saw County 919. I decided on a careful drive-by for reconnaissance, and then the scary part.

I reset the odometer, and at just past 1.1, I saw the sand road. The house, glimpsed as I drove down the lane at thirty-five, looked, granting local variations, like a million other places in the South where substandard people live. And I glimpsed the red truck. My heart started jackhammering, and I had to do Oriental breath tricks to calm myself.

Keeping a close eye on the terrain, I kept moving slow. At a little bend, sure enough, there was a visible footpath through the scrub. I drove a couple of miles farther, turned around, and went back to the spot, which I'd marked by a tallish pine and more odometer work.

So far I'd covered myself with a setup plan, and now came the part where I had to find opportunities and improvise. I wouldn't have been any more scared of this crowd than of any other ignorant white trash anywhere in the world if I hadn't seen their handiwork and, through that, the primitive and bestial mindlessness behind it.

I stopped the car half on the shoulder near the path, turned on the hazard blinker, opened

the trunk lid, and took out the tire-changing gear. I semi-wished I'd brought a pistol, but I feel safer without one. It was hard for me to deliberately deflate the road tire, but I had a can of Tyre-Flate in the trunk for a quick fix if I didn't have to perform the whole act.

The stagesetting was almost complete. I put the camera over my shoulder, unzipped my fly, and walked into the woods. There were imaginary enemies all around, but moving slow and quiet, looking and listening often, I couldn't locate any real ones.

I found a vantage point where breaks in the foliage lined up for two or three hundred yards, giving a glimpse of red at the far end. As exposed as I felt, I knew that in reality I was as invisible to them as a gopher crawling along in the scrub. Like looking from a dark room into a bright street, but more so. I could hear their voices occasionally, which made the hair stand on the back of my neck.

It wasn't a perfect shot, but it was usable. I got most of the back and side of the truck and the whole license tag, zooming right in on it in a way my sixties Leica couldn't have done. I took several shots to be sure of a good one and went back to the car, zipping up my fly as I stepped out of the woods. I shoulda been a actor. I put the

camera out of sight on the floor, used the Tyre-Flate on the flat, and buttoned it all up. I even threw the can on the shoulder for authenticity.

My solo work, barring photographic accidents, was now done. I headed back to Palm City. When I started across the bridge to Live Oak Key, I decided to stop at the shrimp docks first. I drove to the *Mary Jo* and found Jim Pierson doing things to a net. I told him what I'd done, and we exchanged congratulations. Remembering the papers from the glove compartment, I brought them in and we carefully went over them. They were mostly charred receipts and an owner's manual, but tucked into the inside of the manual were tickets from a Honda dealer suggesting that Millicent Smith of Philadelphia was more accurately Millicent Wilson of Bryn Mawr. Not a real name-change artist. I wondered what she was trying to conceal, but I was so sure by now that the girl was basically straight that I wasn't concerned about it, and told Jim to give it low priority. He said he'd contact a resource who could get him the news from that part of the world, but wouldn't be in a big hurry. He took down the street address on the papers.

When I got home, I discovered that Millie had made supper for us. It was something

starting with the chicken from the freezer. I'd been going to make some Jewish-Mother Chicken Soup with it as Mrs. Rosenstein, whom I used to live downstairs from up north, showed me years ago, but in smaller pieces so Millie could get it into her damaged mouth. What Millie had ended up with was somewhere between a fricasee à la Creole and a lunch-counter chicken salad, and it really wasn't very good, but I busted a gut putting on an act. I really was touched at her hobbling around in pain to feed me.

After supper I could tell she was kind of rocky; fatigued and obviously hurting. Her face, where it showed between the bruises, was greyish and her eyes were a kind of dull brown or olive drab. "You overdid it," I told her, and drew her a bath as hot as I thought she could stand. I made this one deeper, since now I had a better idea where the bandages were. I helped her out of the chair and got her started toward the bathroom.

In a couple of minutes I heard her call, faintly and tentatively, sort of like Sam mewling in the swamp. I went to the bathroom door and answered her.

"Please help me," she said. I went in and she was sitting on the edge of the tub, one foot in. "I'm not trying to be pheduc-

tive. I don't think I can get in by myself."

She looked like hell. She had bruises in places where no girl should ever be bruised. Inside of thighs, buttocks, breasts, you name it.

"My God, they even battered your boobs," I gasped before I could stop myself.

That's when she broke down. We ended up with her in the tub, me kneeling on the floor grinding my kneecap off on the tiles, my right arm awkwardly around her, her face buried in my shoulder, and my elbow in the water. "I feel like such a goddam cripple, so *helpless*," she confided to my armpit, and started letting go with tears and sobs she must've been saving up for years.

After a while she slowed down and began to dry up, and I started giggling.

"Am I that funny?" she asked, not amused.

"No, I was just wondering what a visiting anthropologist from Mars would think about our local customs. Kneel on floor, put arm around girl, stick elbow in bathwater."

The tension broken, she started laughing, too. We had a giant gigglefest till her lip started bleeding again, then I ran in more hot till she told me to stop, and I gently worked her over with the washcloth as if I were a practical nurse or as if

she were my infant daughter. Then I pulled her out of the tub and dried her, and found a pair of pajamas I used to wear up north and put them on her to keep her from chilling after the hot tub. The cuffs needed a bit of rolling. I wrapped her in the terry robe and led her to the recliner. She hugged me and said, "You're phweet."

I'd been doing some thinking. I told her I'd have to be away most of tomorrow and had decided she needed a sitter. Among my various late phone calls I arranged for Mrs. Hendry, a semi-retired LPN, to come by for the day.

As I dozed off that night, I wondered if the fantasies trying to creep in at the edge of my mind were perverse. One of my inner voices told me that what I was responding to was the real girl under all the damages, so I went to sleep at peace with myself. I remember my dreams that night.

The sun was somewhere off the Bahama banks on its way to Florida when I woke, with a busy day ahead. I fed myself and Sam quickly and left a note, juice, and coffee for Millie, knowing Mrs. Hendry would arrive before nine. I kissed Millie on the same undamaged corner of the forehead without waking her, and hit the road.

When I got to the docks, Jim had a van all ready for our trip. Janie turned up in a few minutes, and I didn't recognize the friendly, comfortably sloppy barmaid from the Island Inn. She was in casual but classy threads, with a black wig and slightly overdone, nonetheless quite attractive, makeup.

It was a long, hot, sticky, frustrating day. We figured the best place to park was on the westbound side a little past the county road, but they didn't show. It got hot as hell inside the van, and we couldn't use the air. We got to wondering if we should move onto the county road, if maybe they used the other outlet. We turned away a surprising number of pleasant, friendly, and helpful people by telling them help was on the way, and we were ready to shut the engine room hatch and move on in case we spotted the occasional patrol car.

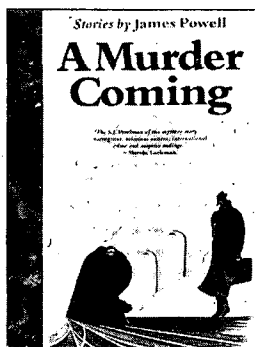
We got home miserable, unhappy, and ready to make another try the next day. I was too tired to be responsive, and Millie had rebuilt a fragile shell of defense and withdrawal around herself as a reaction to busting loose the night before, so we were vaguely pleasant company as we ate the dinner Mrs. Hendry had considerably cooked before she left. We turned in early.

Next morning we went back

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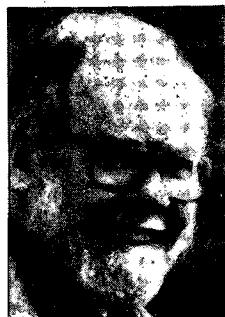


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to the same spot in a different van. Janie, in a sort of Dolly Parton-looking wig today, was in the driver's seat. Jim was in the back with me, itching for action that wouldn't come if we did the job right, and I was hoping the camera wouldn't slip out of my sweaty hands if they did show. Someone had rigged a little fan to run off the twelve-volt system, and we had the after hatch cracked, so it wasn't as bad as the day before.

A little before noon, it happened. We saw the red truck turn out of the county road and head west toward us. They came by slowly, saw a lone woman in the vehicle, pulled onto the shoulder, and backed up.

I had the camera set for aperture priority. I figured a hundredth was fast enough to catch them, and I needed all the depth of field I could get. There was a fresh roll in it, and I must've snapped off twenty exposures of the thirty-six, shooting over, around, and through the curtain as they walked up to Janie's window. I knew part of the shots were too hasty as I kept resetting the zoom, but they were bound to be recognizable in some of them.

They were mean-looking customers. Not any one thing—a little stubble on one's face and a rough beard on the other, a way of swaggering and clomping when they walked, mostly

an expression on both faces that was hard and told of low cunning and basic brutality. Soulless, untempered by compassion, meeting the world with power. It occurs at all levels, but in the bottom classes it stands out more raw and naked.

One of them, the older one—they looked like brothers—faked a smile.

"Need some he'p, honey?" he asked. It was an unpleasant, very recognizable voice, and I wished we'd thought to bring a tape recorder.

"No, thanks. We're just letting it cool off. My brothers are in the back. But thanks anyhow."

They looked like they might try to help nonetheless, standing around after being dismissed, but Janie turned up the volume on the CB just audible enough to remind them we had one, and then Jim put his head through the curtain, and they drifted away. I got some more shots of their backs. As soon as they were down the road a mile or two, Jim closed the engine room, and we went rolling back to Palm City. They must have turned onto a side road; we didn't pass them on our way out.

After the first excited rush of conversation, we didn't talk much. We stopped for a junk-food lunch, drove on in silence, and when we got back to Live

Oak Key I got in my own car and headed straight back to the mainland for the One Hour Color Lab. Russell was at the counter when I walked in.

"Here's your camera back, Russ. And I got a priority job."

"Gimme—" he looked at the clock "—forty-five minutes for proofs, then we can do the blow-ups." His pretty assistant looked impressed at the service I was getting.

I did some shopping chores and got back just as he was pulling the proofs from the dryer. He had a serious, not to say grim, look on his face, and I feared the worst—machinery breakdown, bad chemistry?

"Turn out okay?" I asked anxiously.

"You ain't no portrait artist, but we got faces we can use. Just wanna tell you, no charge for this job."

"Hey, I'm not rich, but I can pay for pitchers."

"Just my contribution to law and order. Look like she's gonna live?"

I remembered the pix of Millie on the first roll. "She's better than she looks, by a little bit. Even tried to cook supper night before last."

He relaxed some. "She might've been pretty once."

"She's healing fast. No broken bones or missing teeth. I might let you see her when she gets her looks back."

We went through the proofs, selecting a bunch to make eight by tens of, and Russ said he'd bring them by after he closed the shop. I made some more contacts on the way home, and got in before five. I was surprised to see Mrs. Hendry's car there, since I'd only hired her for the one day.

"I thought I'd just come by and say hello for a while," she apologized. "I knew you were gonna be busy today. We had a nice lunch." When she got up to go, she took my hand and led me to her car, told me what a strong and brave little girl Millie was, and gave me some mother-hen advice.

Millie's good eye looked a little misty, a sort of cloudy greenish-blue this time. "Nice lady. She brought me some, quote, old things she outgrew. Mostly brand-new."

"There's good people, too, baby. We're not all bad."

She was getting mistier, so I changed the subject. "I have some people coming by tonight," I began.

"Oh, God, where can I hide?"

"You can't. They know you're here. They know you look like the Wreck of the Hesperus, or Death Warmed Over. And we need you for our meeting. It's gonna be kind of hard on you, but your presence is requested." I declined to say more.

After supper they started

drifting in. Russ came by first with the envelope of pictures, and his already having gone through the shock of seeing her face saved him from trauma and her from further damage to her self-esteem.

Toby and Terri called long-distance to say they were grounded in Ocala and couldn't make it, but they weren't essential to the evening's program, and maybe a smaller group would be easier on Millie anyhow.

Then Jim and Janie arrived together. Jim, tough old ex-cop and shrinker that he was, didn't budge a single facial muscle, but I could tell he was shook. Janie, in her real hair but extra-neat, took one look and rushed to Millie, embracing her and saying things like, "Oh, you poor baby." Millie was startled at first, then overcame her reserve and gave in to the mood. They hugged and blubbered and wept at each other for a while. Janie ended up sitting on a hassock holding Millie's hand. Even in our nominally classless society they would never have met, really met, but for this. Now they were sisters for life, sharing experiences I thanked God I'd never know from the inside.

I finished introductions and took the floor. "Millie, I hope you'll forgive us all for intruding in your space. These nice

people, extra-nice supernice people, have been helping me on a project.

"We've been tracking down the bad guys. Because we didn't think the law was likely to catch them. We think we've found them. We want you to look at some pictures and see if we're on the right track." I knew damn well we were. "Are you ready to be brave and take a look?"

She nodded solemnly. I'd sorted the prints—holding back the ones of herself—and handed her the first one.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and she said, "That's the truck. I remember that rope holding the tailgate closed. And the big tires with white mud on them."

"Ready for the next one?" I handed her the best shot of the Swamp Rat Brothers.

"Oh, God, that's them, that's them!" She dropped the print like it was hot, and I could see she was fighting off hysteria. Janie moved closer, squeezing her hand and putting an arm over her shoulder.

After she was back together, we talked over the business aspects of the matter. She was ready, willing, and able—well, fairly able—to talk with the Pickett County law authorities, and determined to testify though she knew it would be reliving terror.

We said goodnight and thanked everybody—how do you thank people for something beyond thanks? Real casual-like, I reckon. That's how we did it because right-sized thanks would've jammed up our throats something fierce.

"Good people, Walt," she said after they'd left.

"Real good, Millie." We'd all had our own personal-hangup reasons for helping her. Everybody's motivation is a little contaminated, I guess, certainly including my own. But when the deed comes out somewhere between heroic and saintly, that seems a petty point to belabor.

The rest was paperwork. For several days life was mostly depositions, interviews, and newspaper items, in which Millie was, thankfully, anonymous. The law found about half her Honda, in bits, and some identifiable personal stuff on their porch. The trial will be held sometime, the prosecutor guesses, but meanwhile they're in jail with nobody to go their bail, thank God. A decent judge—who we made sure saw the pictures—set it about as high as he could in a non-capital case. Jim got, unofficially, about the same dossier on Millie from Pennsylvania that the Pickett County authorities probably got officially. They suddenly stopped acting

like she was a drifter and started treating her like a citizen. Jim just tells me "she's clean" and lets it go at that. I'm not worried. She's housebroke and don't cost much to feed.

I wangled a couple of local assignments for quick cash, and a small out-of-town one for backup—the episode had run me out of reserve and a little into the red—and for a couple of days I was busy in the studio or out on conference, leaving Millie, now much more functional, to amuse herself.

When I came home that Thursday afternoon, Millie didn't answer my cheerful if road-weary greeting. I looked around and called. Sam was there, purring and starving and tripping me as usual. I went to feed him, and there on the kitchen table was a folded letter.

My heart sank. Before I unfolded it, I said, "Well, old boy, I'm afraid I got custody of you." I didn't sound very funny to me.

I put out his catfood, poured lukewarm coffee out of the carafe, and sat down to read the letter.

Dear Walt (it began),

I'm not as articulate as I thought. This took me two days to write.

First, I want to thank you. You took the most horrible experience of my life and turned it around into

something good. I've learned more about myself and people than I ever knew there was to learn.

Second, I need some time. (Thank God, I thought—not over yet!) I've learned more than I can digest all at once, and I have some bad scares to live down.

Third, I love you. Don't ask me what kind, I don't know. There's some sex, and some hero-worship, and some brother-daddy stuff. You've loved me in a way I've never been loved before, I think. And I'm trying to figure out if I can learn to love that same way, I guess. Right now you are closer to me than anyone ever has been. I need to understand this.

I hope we can be lovers. I don't know, and I'm not going to try unless I'm sure. For now, try to be patient with me.

*Your
Milliphant*

P.S: I'm not leaving you until I've worked off my board bill and I've got my real face back.

I took a sip of the coffee and it burned my lips. I realized she'd made it just before I got

there. It was awful coffee, but I loved her for it.

I kicked off my going-to-town-on-business clothes, put on some swim trunks, and walked over to the beach. She was sitting on a cushion on the sand, looking across the bay at Shell Island, or maybe looking inside at her thoughts. My heart leapt, I guess—there was a distinct twitch in my chest—as I reexperienced, more awarably now, the love she'd never been loved with before.

I knew she knew I was there, even though I didn't make any sound, nor did Sam, tagging along in stops and spurts. Without any fear of startling her, I knelt down behind her and put my arms around her. She put her arms over mine and pressed them tight over her chest. She turned her head and I kissed her cheek.

"I think the part of your face just in front of your right ear is already turning real."

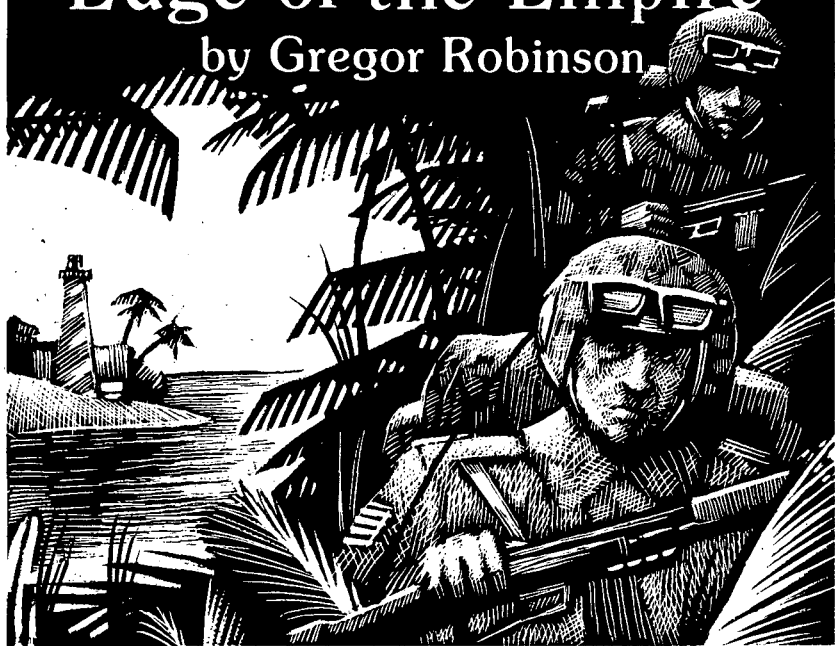
"Do I have to leave as soon as it's all real?"

"Not till you've worked off your board bill. And it keeps going up every day you're here."

After a while Sam came out of the sea grass and lay on the shady side, touching us both, and we all three stayed to watch the sun set.

Guns at the Edge of the Empire

by Gregor Robinson



It was Drover, the storekeeper, who told me that the soldiers had arrived. He was in the bank because the freight boat had come in three days early, and he needed cash to pay for his order. There was no profit to be made in that kind of small, short-term loan, but if I didn't give him the money Drover would go to Schindler, down at the Riverside Tavern. Schindler always had money to lend: he was ru-

mored to be in the drug trade. In his soft voice, Drover said,

"You wouldn't want that, would you, Mr. Rennison, you and me to be supporting the drug trade?"

I okayed the loan. It helped assuage my guilt, for much of the bank's money also came from drugs, if less directly than Schindler's. As Winnie counted out the bills, I asked Drover why the freight boat had been early.

"Bringing soldiers," he said.

I was surprised. I had never seen the army in the islands before. I had believed that such things could never happen here, in this palm-fringed backwater. For me, this was to be the beginning of the end of my career in the bank. I ultimately went undercover because I believed I was implicated in murder—a murder I witnessed.

Drover counted his money and was gone. There seemed little likelihood of more customers that morning, so I shut the wooden door and asked Winnie to begin the reconciliation.

"Winnie?" I repeated. She was looking past me, out the window. "Winnie? What is it?"

She put her hands to her face; she was wide-eyed, open-mouthed, astonished.

There was a clatter on the sidewalk. The door crashed in, splintering the frame onto the floor and shattering the black metal catch. Two soldiers burst into the room with a third close behind, a giant, six and a half feet tall. He must have weighed three hundred pounds. He held the arm of an old man.

"You know him?" the soldier asked, jerking the old man towards me like a rag doll. The man's collar was ripped, his hair matted to his forehead. The officer pushed him face-down onto my desk. The old

man twisted his head to look up at me. He had been beaten. Blood dripped from his mouth onto the wooden floor. Outside, a crowd had started to gather.

The officer shook the man again, as if to shake an answer from me. "You know him?"

He watched me with small eyes. The plastic nametag on his chest said LIEUTENANT BOTTREL. Rumored to be a friend of Schindler's, Bottrel was a well-known if rarely seen figure in the islands. He was the commander of the Abaco detachment of the Defence Force.

I hesitated. I was afraid of sudden violence. I could smell oil from the soldiers' guns, and sweat from the clothing of the old man. Outside, the day was bright. The only sound was the gentle whirring of the ceiling fan.

Jimmy O'Brian owned a small restaurant, the Casuarina, up the creek where the water turned rank and brackish. Once patronized by boat builders, sponge fishermen, sisal and sail makers, the Casuarina's business had declined along with those trades. Jimmy had been to see me about a loan several months before. He had taken me upstairs in the Casuarina, where rooms once let to migrant forest workers and fishermen now stood empty. I could smell rotting wood from the

piers in the waters below. Cobwebs shrouded the windows. But from those windows you could see the entire island, as well as the islands in the outer channel. Through the tops of the swaying palms and across the ridge, I saw the Atlantic Ocean roiling and smoking against the reef. From the north window I looked down the harbor to the candy-striped lighthouse, past the gap to Eagle Rock and the bluegreen sea beyond. The south window faced upstream to the mangrove swamp, while the west windows faced the marina, beyond which was the sea again, hazy on the far side of the island.

There were a couple of old chairs nearby, a full ashtray, some empty beer bottles. Jimmy handed me a pair of binoculars. You could see everything; he said that at night you could see the lights of Marsh Harbour. He planned to open a bar to cater to tourists and yachtsmen, serving seafood and conch salad.

A view was not the sort of collateral on which we normally lent money, but Jimmy had been among my first customers and I approved the loan. When I told Healey, over on one of his visits from the office that ran all the out-island branches, he rolled his eyes.

"Jimmy says he can raise about twenty-five thousand dollars on his own," I said, "so

somebody must think he knows what he's doing."

"I wonder where Jimmy can get ahold of money like that," Healey said.

"No," I said to Lieutenant Bottrel, "I don't know him."

"You didn't give him money?"

"No." This was the truth: Jimmy had taken up none of the loan because there had been a string of bad luck. Someone had left the shutters open and rain lashed into the upstairs rooms, ruining the walls. A crawfish boat rammed into one of the piers, knocking it from under the supporting beam, so that the entire building now leaned dangerously toward the water.

Jimmy twisted his head, struggling. One of the soldiers brought the butt of his rifle down on Jimmy's back, and he sprawled to the floor. They dragged him away.

After lunch I called on Tom Hargreaves—we were supposed to join some others for tennis down at Burnett's plantation—but he had not yet returned from his weekly trip across the channel.

"Why don't you sit outside while you wait," Mary Hargreaves said. She hurried back inside the house, closing the doors to Hargreaves' elaborate radio room as she went.

I sat on the side terrace to

avoid the wind from the Atlantic, which was strong that day. The Hargreaveses' house was set back from the beach and the growth was dense: rude red hibiscus, pale oleander, bougainvillea that spilled from the garden into the forest beyond the terrace wall. Sunlight filtered through the palms and frangipani to the spiky ferns and the green and purple oyster plants that covered the ground. When the wind blew, the light shifted from green to yellow, as though underwater. The air rushed through the sea grapes, shuffling the leaves. I dozed. Then I saw sudden movement. There was a dark face before me. Then a gun. I stood up, suddenly awake. As far along the rise as I could see, soldiers struggled through the underbrush, khaki and olive against the flashing leaves. They held their guns in front of them as shields against the snapping branches. They had started their search on the beach below the low cliffs and were now making their way through the scrub, up the ridge, across the isthmus to Black Creek on the other side. A small spotter plane approached from the sea and swooped low over the harbor.

Moments later Mary came onto the terrace. "Tom called," she said. "He's going straight to Burnett's place. He says you should meet him there. You

should walk along the beach, rather than up the road, if you want to avoid the soldiers."

"They were looking for drugs," said Tom Hargreaves. "Part of some special task force." He said he had heard all about it on his fancy radio.

"There must have been some kind of tipoff," said Burnett. We were sitting on Burnett's deck facing the ocean, drinking from a pitcher of rum and fruit juice which his housekeeper had set before us. I told them about Lieutenant Bottrel's visit to the bank.

"I wonder what he had to do with the operation," said Hargreaves. "These fellows sweeping the island are not Bottrel's men. They are the *real* army, from New Providence."

Hargreaves always knew a lot about what was going on in the island: he regularly eavesdropped with his powerful radio system.

Burnett fiddled with his pipe. He was unusually silent. He was garrulous and sociable, but as a banker (he was on the board of directors of the bank, up in Montreal), he loathed publicity. He turned to me.

"I recommend you lie low. Don't say anything. You might close early for the next day or two. Don't take any big deposits. We don't want some kind of investigation, like they had at

that bank over on Bimini." (There, one day, a man had strolled into the bank and deposited seven hundred fifty thousand dollars. Afterwards, there had been congressional investigations and subpoenas.)

In the sky the little airplane swooped and dipped, crisscrossing the island.

"Another drink, old man?" said Hargreaves. He seemed very nervous.

The searchers found a couple of wrecked speedboats in the swamp; these would have been used maybe three or four times, traveling flat out at ninety miles an hour between the islands and Miami until the engines burned out, the propeller shafts cracked, and they were abandoned. There were no drugs, however, and the army was gone by sunset.

Jimmy spent three nights in the jail cell beneath the post office. Saturday night Bottrel and the two soldiers drank and caroused in the billiard room of the Riverside. I could hear their shouting, the pounding bass of the jukebox from my house at the far end of the harbor. In the morning Schindler paid the bill.

On Monday, the soldiers marched Jimmy to the pier where their boats were tied. He returned a week or so later. I saw him sometimes in the evenings at the window of the listing second floor of the

Casuarina, watching his dream disappear, I supposed.

Faded polo shirt, worn canvas shorts (carefully pressed and cleaned), leather Top-Siders, sunglasses on poodle straps: I knew the type—yachtsman from New England chartering bareboat and cruising the Sea of Abaco. Probably a Wall Street lawyer or investment banker, maybe owned his own company. I was prepared for an educated Yankee accent and some high denomination traveler's checks. Instead, it was a mid-western accent, and he wanted to talk about more than traveler's checks.

"Buy you a drink?" he said, glancing towards Winnie to indicate that he wanted to speak to me alone. There was no private office in the bank—the whole place was one smallish room with a counter across the middle—so we crossed the road to the Terrace Bar of the Majestic Hotel. It was there at a white iron table overlooking the Atlantic that he showed me his card—"Identification, we call it," he said—and my heart sank. I hoped Healey would not see us, or even worse, Burnett. I declined his offer of conch fritters. I wanted this to be a short meeting. He must have noticed my furtiveness, for he said:

"It's okay. You're the only

guy knows I'm here. Supposed to be a lawyer on holiday. Got a Nonesuch in the harbor."

The man was DEA. This was the agency that had set in motion the subpoena business at the bank in Bimini. I was as much for law and order as the next person, but for a bank in a tax haven, this kind of attention was the kiss of death. There was a cool sea breeze coming in from Portugal, but I felt myself starting to sweat.

There wasn't much small talk. "You know why I'm here," he said.

Everyone on the island knew of the shadowy parallel world that existed alongside the tourists, the endless beaches, the expatriates in white ducks and Bermuda shorts at the Yacht Club, alongside also the village and the scruffy settlements of the refugees. But we never actually acknowledged it. We heard rumors about the airstrips that dotted the islands, where, on certain clear nights, lumbering DC-3's from South America landed with cargo that was quickly loaded aboard smaller planes. And right here on Pigeon Cay, we had heard about early morning drops from the air to waiting fishing boats, and about transshipment to Florida by speedboats like those burned-out hulks the soldiers had found in the swamp.

"I don't see how I can help you," I said.

"As far as I can tell, you are the only expatriate on the entire island who actually works. And you run the only bank."

"There are banks at Marsh Harbour, on some of the other islands," I said.

"Yes. And we're watching them very carefully." I felt quite certain he was threatening me.

"What, exactly, were you thinking of?" I said.

"A sharp eye. You must know who has money here, who doesn't. Where the deals happen. You have a house at the mouth of the harbor. Maybe you even see things."

It was true that I had noticed certain activities at night. Some of the fishing boats leaving by darkness. And, once or twice, those speedboats, idling low, their running lights off, creeping into the harbor to the pier of the Riverside Tavern. You never saw those sleek craft by day.

"You must have someone here already," I said, "someone who can tell you what is supposed to be going on."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody we can still count on. Besides, even if we think we know what's going on, we have no real authority here. We can pass information on to the Bahamians, but, well, you know

the government here. Somehow, nothing ever seems to happen."

"I really must be going. Our busiest time, you know." I made a move to push my chair back from the table.

"I quite understand. I will come with you."

I returned to my chair.

"What we really need is information to help us nab them in the States. You might take notes of especially large deposits and withdrawals, especially in cash. Transfers and drafts. Dubious business investments. Names and dates. I hardly need tell you—you know how it's done."

"In the Bahamas there are laws about this sort of thing. Strict confidentiality. Even if I wanted to help you, I'm afraid I couldn't."

"I know all about the laws. But we have no such impediments in Florida. We can happily go after any number of your bank's branches in Broward and Dade County, especially those where we suspect people like, say, Mr. Schindler, make irregular transfers from your office here on Pigeon Cay. I'm sure we can even see to it that your name is mentioned in the newspapers. How do you think that would go over in Montreal?"

There was much that I could

tell him, but I believed he was bluffing. "Now I really *must* be going," I said.

"Of course. I'm sorry to have kept you. You change your mind, here is how you can reach me." The card he gave me bore the number and address of a marina in Pompano Beach; I was to leave a message for Mr. Smith. I put the card in the bottom drawer of my desk along with all the others.

I was wakened early Sunday morning several weeks later by Drover knocking loudly at my door. I had slept poorly, kept awake by the high wind snapping the lines against the metal flagpole.

"Mr. Rennison, you got to come. Bring your boat. Meet us at the pier of the Majestic."

Outside it was still dark—a pearly grey. I made my way to the stone parapet below the front of the house, winched the Zodiac down the concrete incline, then dragged it across the strip of sand to the sea. In the air was the smell of burning wood from the nearest of the Haitian villages.

A group of figures like ghosts moved about the end of the pier of the Majestic Hotel. "What is it?" I asked as I drew closer.

"Man in the river," said Constable MacMahon. He poured me a cup of steaming coffee

from a battered urn, a regular part of his sea-rescue equipment. "Mr. Rennison, you take Seymour here and go on ahead, ask his mother what happened."

Up Black Creek we motored, beyond the rotting wharves of the old schooner captains. On the left were the back piers of the wealthy expatriates whose lavish houses stood beyond the ridge, facing the Atlantic. The passage narrowed. In the east the sky became pink, shot through with pale yellow streamers.

Looming before us, the last building before the creek dissipated into a maze of streams and dark swamp impassable to all but the smallest boats, was the Casuarina Cafe. The main structure was leaning even more than before; at high winter tide the corner of the front dining room was under the surface—you could hear the water lapping against the floorboards, then retreating with a sucking noise. The smaller, original part of the building—a single story built along the bank of the creek—was level, and still open. This was where the open kitchen and counter were located. Celia Dufresne, the cook, stood on the planking of the pier. On weekends she stayed at the cafe, sleeping in a lean-to at the rear of the building.

"He come out here to check

on his boat," she said in a flat voice. "He never come back."

She gazed up the creek towards the mangrove swamp. The tide rose in greasy eddies.

We found Jimmy's boat around a bend in the river, not fifty yards from the cafe, wallowing to the gunwales, flayed lines trailing. Seymour Dufresne hopped on the deck, stuck his head in the cabin window.

"Find anything?" I asked.

"Radio smashed," he said.

"Must have broken loose in the wind."

We spent three hours in the swamp; we traveled so far in that we could no longer use the motors but had to paddle and pole among those tangled roots and branches, working against the suction of the now retreating tide. We found no body. The theory was that Jimmy O'Brian had suffered a heart attack while securing his lines in the high wind of the night before, that he had fallen overboard and drowned, and that his body had been carried away by the tide.

Crossing back across the harbor, I noticed a boat that had not been anchored there before—markings crudely painted over, bristling with aerials, guns shrouded in thick black canvas, and hugely out of scale in this place—one of the U.S. Coast Guard vessels that had been lent to the government. The fol-

lowing morning the boat was gone, slipped away under cover of darkness.

“Look at this,” Healey said. Spread out on the desk before him were graphs prepared by the head office in Nassau. He pointed, following the lines with two fingers of one hand. “A trend is developing. Business down in your office, up everywhere else. What do you make of that?”

I had no answer.

“No? Here’s something else.”

He loved, for once, knowing more about what was going on in the business than I did. From the side of his desk he pulled another pair of graphs. “This line shows what usually happens to business in these island branches this time of year. We get a slight falloff after Christmas, then more or less level till mid-March, then steadily falling business until the summer. Now here’s you.”

I did not like this sudden personal note. He pointed to the other graph. “Business already below end of March levels.”

“It’s a mystery to me,” I said.

“Well, you might check it out. Before Burnett does.”

It was a warning and I took it. First thing back on the island I called in at the Riverside Tavern. If anyone knew what was going on it would be Schin-

dlar; he had his finger into everything. I heard the crackle of the barman’s radiophone as he acted on my request. The day was so still I could almost hear Schindler answering from his cruiser out in the harbor, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away. Schindler had a suite of rooms above the bar, but he lived on his boat.

The barman returned. “Says he’ll meet you, but not here. Terrace Bar of the Majestic. Six o’clock.”

From my table by the pool I watched Schindler striding up the hill. He paused, removed his straw hat, and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He was balding, with what red hair remained cut close to his head. His face was fleshy, with a broad nose and a squint.

While waiting for our drinks, we overheard the conversation of some young Americans at a table nearby: a girl in tan Bermuda shorts and a loose sleeveless top, and a couple of men, nineteen or twenty years old. One of them wore a UCLA sweatshirt.

“We were supposed to get some blow, you know, take it back to the boat?” said one of the men.

“Hey, they’re gonna check you in West Palm,” said the other.

“No problem. You go ashore in the outboard, then clear cus-

toms afterwards. No kidding, last time I was over here, a couple of months ago, I meet this guy in the Riverside, that bar we were in, a black guy, and he says he can get me half a kilo, a hundred percent, five thousand dollars."

"So?"

"Means we cut it once, we make—I don't know—fifty grand maybe?"

"So?" said the girl.

"So I go over there today and, like, nothing's happening. Nothing is there. Place has dried up."

I looked at Schindler. He said:

"What on *earth* could they be talking about, do you suppose?"

"Business is down all around," I said. "It has started to affect Drover, even the bank."

"What about this old man, fellow who was in trouble with the police?" said Schindler. He paused. "The restaurant owner who had all those . . . unfortunate accidents."

"Jimmy O'Brian? He's dead."

Schindler signaled the bar for another drink.

"Did they ever find the body?"

"You think he's still alive?"

I said.

"One hears rumors," said Schindler.

"Why don't you ask your friend Lieutenant Bottrel to look into it."

"Mr. Rennison, you pay me a compliment, to imagine that

a simple hotelier such as myself would have any influence with the military forces of the national government."

"One hears rumors," I said.

Schindler smiled. "Quite so, Mr. Rennison. As a matter of fact—and only since you raise the matter—my impression is that Lieutenant Bottrel is routinely ignored by the government, that he is kept quite in the dark with regards to operations in these islands and our government's various cooperative ventures with the Americans."

"Perhaps that's because of his friendship with you," I said.

"I cannot believe that our 'friendship,' as you put it, is so widely known as that, Mr. Rennison. No. My impression is that Lieutenant Bottrel is an incompetent. I believe you've had some dealings with the man?"

"He is very competent with a rifle butt," I said.

"It is precisely because of his fierce reputation that no one will speak to Lieutenant Bottrel. Whereas a man like you, Mr. Rennison, a sober banker, the only banker on the island, you have links throughout the community. I feel certain people would talk to you. The Haitians, for instance."

"What are you suggesting?" I said.

"I am not suggesting any-

thing at all. As a fellow businessman, I am commiserating. This is a small community. We are on the fringes of commerce here. We don't need trouble."

"What do you think the trouble is?"

Suddenly Schindler was direct. "I think those soldiers that were here a month or so ago have frightened away the customers. These sweeps of the islands. The American boats in the channels. The joint task force. That's what's hurting business."

"You mean the tavern business," I said.

"The tavern business—of course. And the banking business. As you have said, the trouble affects us all, even the grocers. Would you care for another drink?"

For a long time a group of Haitian refugees had wanted a loan to mount some kind of salvage operation. It had always seemed doubtful to me, and to Burnett as well; he liked to say that we weren't in the foreign aid business. But when I told him about my conversation with Schindler and his suggestion that the Haitians might know something about our declining prosperity, he changed his mind. "I suppose you had better go and at least have a look," he had said.

I took a small boat from the hotel and rowed across the harbor to the end of Horseshoe Bay. There was an opening cut through the mangroves to the stony shore where a path led through the bush. Both in the muddy lagoon and in the small creek along the path were half-submerged and rotting boats. At Pigeon Cay, when you had no more use for a boat, you towed it to Horseshoe Bay and let it go. Others washed up in storms—fishing boats, dinghies, a small cruiser or two, sailers, abandoned outboards.

Soon I saw the first of the shanties. I crossed a stream of sewage. This was the largest and most accessible of the Haitian settlements on the island. Not only Haitians lived here but also more obscure refugees: criminals from Cuba, displaced freedom fighters from Central America, people without countries—the refuse of the Caribbean, thrown up by dictatorships and secret police.

There was the acrid smoke of burning silverwood. I was investigated by piebald dogs and followed by silent children. I asked one of them to take me to Seymour Dufresne.

Our meeting lasted about half an hour. After I had agreed to the loan for the salvage operation (he had managed to secure a few thousand dollars from another investor, which would

hearten Burnett), I asked Seymour what he knew about Jimmy O'Brian. He understood it was a deal: money for information.

"Follow me," he said.

He led me through the scattered, beached hulls among the trees until we came to Jimmy's boat. There were five three-quarter-inch holes bored neatly below the stain of the water line. I felt them with my fingers. They were recent, no doubt what had caused the boat to sink and, heavy with water, break away from the lines with the high tide on the night of the storm. In the cabin were the remains of an elaborate and expensive radio, smashed as though with an axe.

"Where's Jimmy?" I asked.

Seymour shrugged his shoulders. "Gone." He would say nothing more. I asked him to take me to see his mother. Celia Dufresne sat outside a windowless hut with a couple of other old women, splicing ropes from the wrecks in the harbor. She nodded in response to my greeting. I offered her a cigarette and we sat in silence for a while—myself, Seymour, and the three old women. At length the other two women, with much effort, rose to their feet and left. I said to Celia:

"I have seen Jimmy O'Brian's boat. Five little holes drilled in the hull." I made a motion with

my thumb and finger to indicate the size of the holes. Celia Dufresne said nothing. I continued. "You were staying there that night?"

She nodded.

"You said that morning that Jimmy went to check on his boat, that he never came back. What happened? How did he fall into the river?"

Celia glanced at her son. He gave her a look of warning, but she spoke anyway. She had been very attached to Jimmy O'Brian.

"He never fell over. He jumped, headed up the swamp with the tide before they come to get 'im."

"No heart attack?" I said. "No going out to look at the boat in the storm?"

Celia waved one hand in front of her face to dismiss those ideas. "We were sitting in the kitchen after closing, before the wind come up. We hear noises. So Jimmy go outside—I was watching from the window. I guess he seen those holes in the boat, the water coming in, the radio and all like that. He turn around real fast, like he seen someone on the road. Then he jumps in the river, swimming across there, up the swamp. In the morning, when Constable MacMahon come around for his early coffee, like he do every morning, I tell him that about Jimmy falling in."

She bent down, returning to her splicing. When I pushed my chair back against the wall, I noticed an aerial coming from the hut, newly attached.

"You got a new radio here?" I asked.

"A gift," said Celia.

"Where is Jimmy O'Brian?"

"He gone away," said Celia.

So he was alive after all. It was what I wanted to hear. Seymour stepped forward.

"No more. No more," he said, as though speaking about Jimmy would put him in danger. But it was too late to stop Celia.

"He gone to that place on Great Abaco, the place they got the dogs," Celia said. "He sick of it. He want to make a deal, go back to being at the cafe."

"When is he meeting them?" I asked.

"Midnight," said Celia.

Seymour stepped between us. The meeting was over.

There was no answer when I knocked on the door of Tom Hargreaves' house later that morning. It was something about the radios that had brought me there—the smashed radio on Jimmy O'Brian's boat, the new radio in Celia Dufresne's windowless hut in the middle of that ragged settlement. I opened the door and walked in, calling as I went. In the white room at the front of

the house, on the ocean side, a gun rested on a table by the door. Sunlight through the jalousie illuminated the gun like a flat, colorless photograph. The gun was newly oiled. Next to it was an opened box of bullets.

"David! Let yourself in, did you? Caught me by surprise, I must say. Just cleaning things up a bit." In his hand Tom Hargreaves held an oily rag. He hurried past me to scoop up the gun and bullets. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure? Care for a drink?"

I told him no thanks, I just had a couple of questions, business, about a loan I was thinking of making. Checking it out. Maybe he could help.

"Fire away!" said Tom.

"It's about Jimmy O'Brian."

"Oh?" said Tom. His enthusiasm faded.

"The day the soldiers swept the island, looking for drugs, you told us all about it, out at Burnett's place. You remember that?"

"Seems to me I do remember, yes. What of it?"

"I was just wondering how you knew, Tom, that's all. You were out all morning on your trip to Marsh Harbour—I know that because I spent some time waiting for you here—and then you went straight to Burnett's place, so you couldn't have heard anything on your radio. At least not that day."

Tom went quite pale. We sat for a moment listening to the surf crashing on the beach.

"So you know," said Tom evenly.

"I know Jimmy O'Brian had a radio on that boat of his. I know he had suddenly found some money to put into the restaurant. I think he gave some money to Seymour Dufresne and the Haitians for the salvage operation. What do you know, Tom?"

Hargreaves was silent. Finally he said:

"Twenty-five thousand dollars. Half by bank deposit at the start, the rest in cash when the operation was over. That's what Jimmy was getting from the Americans—Drug Enforcement Agency—in return for telling them things. Where the boats came in, the dropoffs, things like that—there was a kind of code, so I don't know exactly what all he told them, and I don't know how he knew what he did. But I heard them talking. They told him there was going to be a sweep, that's the day the first of Jimmy's money would go to a bank in Miami."

"That was also the day that Lieutenant Bottrel was here," I said. "He must have known, too. What else, Tom?"

"What do you mean?"

"These Coast Guard boats in the channels. The task force. I

think Jimmy is still at it. I was in the Haitian village. There is a new high frequency radio there."

"So that's where he is," said Hargreaves. "You're right, of course. But the last message was sent over ten days ago now. He must be afraid."

"He should be. I think somebody almost got him the night of the storm. Would anyone else know about this, Tom?"

"No one else in the islands has a radio like mine," said Hargreaves. He looked down at the gun and the box of bullets which he still cradled in his lap. He was afraid, too. He said, "You won't tell anyone about me, will you, David?"

I was back at the bank by eleven o'clock. On Mondays Burnett generally dropped by to chat about how we had done the previous week. When I heard the sound of his old Land Rover pulling up by the rear steps, I strolled across the road to join him at the Terrace Bar. I told him about what Hargreaves had discovered, that Jimmy O'Brian had been working with the task force.

"Yes, Tom mentioned it to me, too," said Burnett. "I suppose O'Brian is in the drug business himself—how else would he know what's going on? I tell you, I never liked the fellow. Anything else?"

"He is still transmitting. Or

has been until the past week or so. Celia Dufresne told me that Jimmy is going to meet his contacts tonight, at the bar on Abaco, the place where they have the dogs."

"Remote spot," said Burnett.

"Especially the first of the week when the dogs aren't fighting," I said. "Probably why they picked it."

We finished our drinks and I walked Burnett over to the Land Rover.

"Whatever happens, I hope all this ends soon," he said. "I don't like to see these people in the village suffering like this. We need prosperity here. We need the tourists." He started the engine. "Anyway, keep me posted." He put the car in gear and drove away.

It was not until late afternoon that it struck me—what Tom Hargreaves had told me, what Burnett had said.

I ran from the bank and down the Queen's Highway to Constable MacMahon's house. I told him to get hold of the task force in any way he could, to tell someone that the meeting with Jimmy O'Brian had been moved forward, to get to the bar on Abaco as soon as possible. I left by the back door and scrambled down the embankment, through the frangipani to the government pier. The sun was sinking below the height of land behind

the lighthouse, making the high palm trees look like black cut-outs. I waved, then shouted to Ti-Paul, sitting at the taxi wharf on the far side of the harbor.

Night fell as we crossed the channel. We landed at a solitary pier jutting out from trees along the dark shore. Ti-Paul had called a taxi on his radio-phone: the van was waiting at the floor of the pier, by the road that led up the hill and into the forest. I sat on an iron bench in the back of the van, hanging on as we rattled over pot-holed roads.

"What you goin' there for, mister?" the driver asked me. "No fights tonight."

"You bring anyone else out here today?" I asked.

"No, but I seen some guy walking along this road late afternoon."

Forty minutes later he let me out at the side of the bar, a ramshackle place, one of three buildings in a clearing in the bush. Now the moon made the night bright. The parking lot was empty except for a battered Jeep. Inside there was a slow-moving fan, the smell of smoke and mildew. Dim lights lit shelves of bottles behind the bar. The place was almost empty. The Americans apparently weren't here yet. Nor was Jimmy. Yet he had left the island by mid-morning. Even traveling carefully, to remain

unseen, he should have been here hours ago. I asked the barman.

"Yeah, he was in here, maybe half an hour ago."

"Anyone else?"

"Three soldiers. Defence Force guys. I think they all gone out back to look at the dogs."

I walked as fast as I could along the cinder path that wound through the bush. As I drew nearer, I heard the sound of barking and snarling dogs. Suddenly I was out of the trees and in a clearing, at the edge of a pool of light. The sloping sides of the pit—about fifteen feet deep and twenty-five feet across—were before me. The light came from a pole a quarter of the way around the pit to my right. Beneath the pole were the cages, and in front of these stood four men. Bottrel stood slightly apart, watching. He held a stubby shotgun in his hand. The other two men held Jimmy O'Brian, one on each arm. They were standing in front of a cage with two snarling dogs. All of them were looking at me.

"We be interrogatin' someone," said Bottrel. They were using the threat of putting Jimmy in with the dogs to get answers. "You better be gettin' along out of here."

While the soldiers looked at me, Jimmy pulled free. With a leap, he threw himself towards

Bottrel's back. The dogs were in a frenzy. Bottrel turned and fired one shot. The volley struck Jimmy in the chest with a force that threw him off his feet and into the bush.

In slow motion Bottrel turned, bringing the gun up until it was parallel with the ground. The muzzle came up towards my chest. How many shells did a shotgun hold? Was it two, or did the new ones have clips? I saw his finger on the trigger. I lurched forward, throwing myself in a roll into the darkness of the pit. The explosion of the gun was in my ears. As I tumbled, I hit my head. Movement and shouting. People swarmed out of the bush and down the earthen sides of the pit. I hit the ground, dazed. There was a roaring noise and the pit was bathed in glaring light. I was blinded by arc lamps from a low, hovering helicopter.

An American was at my side. "You okay?" he asked. The soldiers asked me one or two questions, where I could be reached. Along with the two soldiers, I was a witness and would be needed for the investigation and any legal action that might follow.

Some weeks later lawyers came from Freeport to see about Jimmy O'Brian's will and possessions. I took them to the

empty restaurant. There was a buyer for the Casuarina, they told me, willing to pay an excellent price. He was going to tear the place down. Upstairs; Jimmy's binoculars were still on the table. From here you could see everything. To a patient observer, all the pieces and mechanics of the drug trade would come together nicely.

I noticed Schindler looking up at me across the road. He waved. "Mr. Rennison, I am walking back to the village. Join me, won't you?"

We strolled beneath the palms. Schindler said, "I hear there is some mysterious buyer for the cafe, yes?"

I said nothing. Instead I mentioned that Lieutenant Bottrel had been arrested.

"It will be self-defense. The man had a knife." Evidently the fix was already in. In the Bahamas, somehow there were seldom convictions for drug-related crimes.

"Still, we are at last getting rid of some of these corrupt officials," I said.

"At last," echoed Schindler. "Now maybe the Americans will leave us alone."

"Perhaps Lieutenant Bottrel will tell who exactly it was that

had been corrupting him."

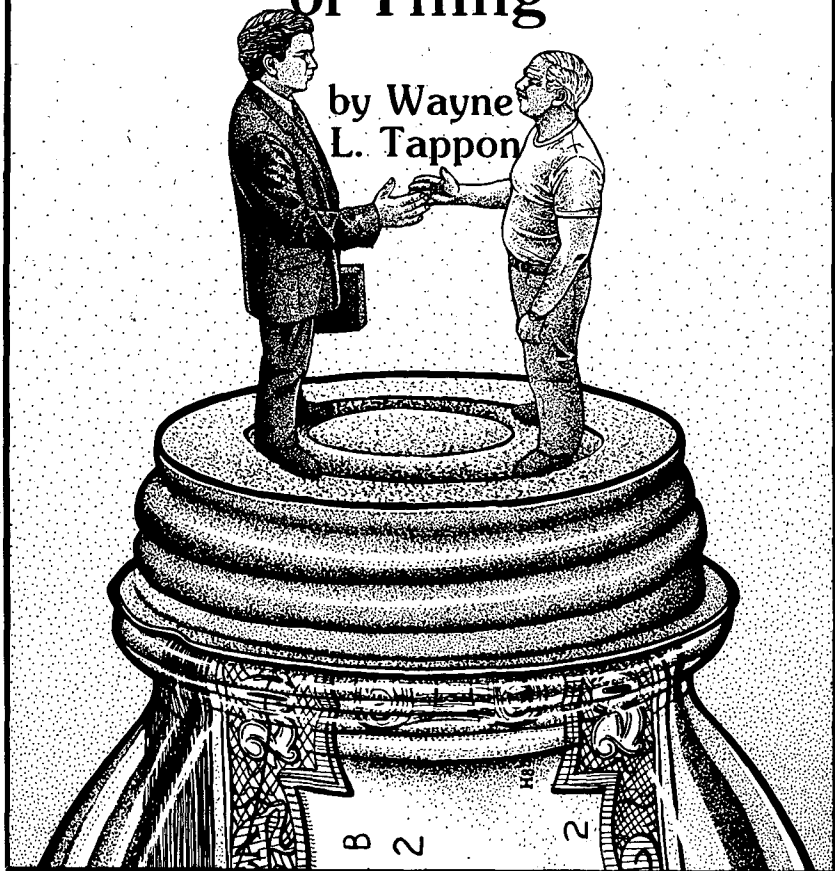
"We can only hope," said Schindler. He turned to look directly at me. "Alas, I feel certain he will say nothing."

I wondered if Burnett had told Schindler about Jimmy's broadcasts and about the midnight meeting at that remote bar on purpose or inadvertently. It hardly mattered. I was enmeshed either way, for if Tom Hargreaves had told Burnett about Jimmy's original involvement with the Americans, I was the one who had told him about the meeting. And Burnett had told Schindler; of that I was certain.

The task force and the boats in the channel were gone. Soon business for all of us in the village would be back to normal. There could be no atonement for Jimmy's death. All the same, I wrote a postcard to a Mr. Smith, care of the Pines Marina, Pompano Beach, Florida, expressing the hope that he would visit us soon. I then began making detailed notes on some of the larger cash transactions and transfers the bank had made over the past year. The first name on the list was Mr. Heinrich Schindler, of the Riverside Tavern.

Good at This Sort of Thing

by Wayne
L. Tappon



Dennis Zachariah Lockhart drove his Mercury Cougar down the narrow street past aging tract houses, peering out the window into the darkness for the address. It was only seven o'clock, but even in Southern Califor-

nia the sun sets early in January. He saw a porch light, checked the number against the slip of paper in his hand, and swung into the curb.

The place didn't seem promising. The stucco house had a new coat of paint but still looked

like any one of the tract houses builders threw up by the thousands after World War II. Still, you never could tell. Jack Kirkpatrick, who owned a Chevrolet agency, had put him in touch, and Jack was one of Dennis's best clients. According to Jack, the guy owned a small plumbing business, so he might be good for a couple of hundred bucks.

As a business consultant and tax adviser, Dennis, in his late forties, was something of a maverick. Operating out of an office in his West L.A. condominium, he specialized in helping small businessmen in trouble and had gained a reputation as a man who could show people how to cut corners without stepping outside the law; or at least how to tiptoe down the line without stepping over too far or too often.

He smoothed both hands over his thinning brown hair, picked up his attaché case, and walked up the driveway. Stepping up onto the porch, he straightened his silk paisley tie with one hand and rang the bell.

A muscular gnome of a man in shirtsleeves opened the door and peered up at Dennis from beneath fuzzy eyebrows that crawled across his forehead like two caterpillars.

"Mr. Carnelian, I'm Dennis Lockhart." Dennis thrust out his calling card.

"Yeah, I was expecting you." Moe Carnelian turned and walked into the house. Dennis hesitated a moment, card in hand, then followed, pausing to close the door. The little man led the way into the kitchen and sat down behind a vinyl-topped table with tubular metal legs. Dennis laid his attaché case on the table, which looked damp from recent washing, and glanced around the room. There were dirty dishes stacked in the sink. He resisted the impulse to wipe off the plastic seat of the chair before he sat down. Neither the house nor the man was what he had expected, but he'd get in and out fast. "I understand you might have some tax problems," he said.

Moe eyed him suspiciously. "Maybe."

"Jack Kirkpatrick suggested you might have a problem similar to the one he had." Dennis leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Jack's problem was some excess cash he'd accumulated that hadn't previously been declared. We had to find a way to absorb it gradually into his stated income and at the same time maximize his deductions so the taxes wouldn't hit him all at once. Is your problem similar?"

"Something like that," Moe said.

Dennis gave him a reassur-

ing smile. "Well, believe me, Mr. Carnelian, you're not the first businessman to find himself in this dilemma. I guess it's safe to assume you've taken some money out of the business and haven't told the government about it. If that's the case, I can help, but you'll have to be completely honest with me. I'm going to ask you some questions so I can get an idea of how to solve your problem. Okay?"

Moe stared silently back. Dennis opened the attaché case, pulled out a legal pad, and said, "About how long would you say you've been understating the income?"

"A little over thirty years."

"Thirty years?" Dennis looked up sharply. "Did you say thirty years?"

"Yeah. About that." Moe's expression was defiant. "When I started my own shop in '58, everyone told me only suckers paid taxes, so I started skimming off the top and I've been salting some away ever since."

"And it's all in cash?" Moe nodded. Dennis stared. Now what do we have here? he thought.

"Tell me, Mr. Carnelian, where do you keep these funds?"

"Here and there." Moe picked at a hangnail.

"In bank accounts?"

"Are you serious?" Moe said.

"Well, is it in safe deposit boxes?"

"No." Moe was emphatic. "I don't like banks." He looked back at his nails. "It's where I can get it if I need it."

He's got it in the house, Dennis thought. Sure as hell it's here on the property.

"Well," he said, "several of my clients have accumulated substantial amounts of cash. Some have hidden away thirty, forty thousand. Why, one gentleman had nearly a hundred thousand in his freezer." He coughed. "Do you have an accurate count on the cash you have?"

Moe didn't hesitate. "Yeah, it's a little over eight hundred and ninety thousand."

Dennis's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Jesus," he said. He tried to speak, then swallowed again. "How much were you declaring for taxes?"

Moe hunched and scowled. "That's the trouble. In the beginning I was declaring ten or twelve thousand a year, which was more than half of what I was taking in, but then, even though I raised it some, I guess I was declaring maybe around twenty percent of the gross." Moe examined the backs of his hands. "Maybe less," he admitted.

Dennis cleared his throat and lowered his chin, his voice solemn. "You do understand, don't you, that failure to report income is a federal offense? Are

you aware that you could suffer extreme financial penalties as well as a lengthy prison term?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know all that. I knew that when I started. What I need to know now is how can I start spending my money. You know, without attracting attention." Moe looked into Dennis's face. "Jack said you were good at this sort of thing. He said you'd know what to do."

Dennis made an earnest effort to look sincere. He used to think of his delivery as smooth until the day his ex-wife told him, "Oh, you're beyond smooth, Dennis. You've reached slick. Maybe even oily."

He rested his elbows on the table and made little tents with his fingers. "You're going to need the services of a specialist, and although I don't want to sound immodest, I don't believe you could find anyone who has as much experience and expertise with this type of problem." Dennis extracted a gold Cross pen from an inner pocket. "Have you spent any of the money?"

"Oh yeah, some." Moe shrugged. "I bought a boat so's I could do a little fishing, and most of the furniture, and a few things for Sandy—she's my wife." He paused and stared at the table. "And the funeral expenses. I paid that all in cash."

"Funeral?"

"Yeah, for Cora, my first wife. Died two years ago."

"I'm sorry. Then Sandy is your second wife?"

"Yeah. She's Cora's niece. She came to help out when Cora had the stroke. She took care of her till she died."

"I see." Dennis nodded. "Then you fell in love with Sandy."

Moe looked away. "I guess so. She said I shouldn't be alone. She said I needed someone to take care of me. She said Natalie needed a mother."

"Natalie?"

"Yeah. That's my daughter. She lives here, too."

"And how old is Natalie?"

"She's twenty-seven. She helps me down at the shop."

"I see." Dennis's head was nodding up and down like a bobble doll. "And how old is Sandy?"

"She'll be thirty-five in April."

"I see." Dennis glanced at Moe's fringe of white hair. *I wonder if this old goat is keeping up with his new wife?* He went on.

"Tell me, Mr. Carnelian, did Cora know about the money?"

"Oh, sure. Saving it was her idea. Cora's family lost all their money during the Depression when their bank went under. She worried about being broke again, so she always used to say we should save it for a rainy day."

As Dennis probed, Moe went on to explain that his daughter knew nothing about the money

and wasn't to know. Moe seemed embarrassed and reluctant to talk about his daughter and the cash in the same breath. On the other hand, Sandy apparently knew about the money but didn't know where it was hidden. As Moe talked, Dennis formed a picture in his mind of Sandy, a malcontent and shrew. The picture enlarged and changed when Moe mentioned that Sandy spent most of her evenings running around the city with girlfriends.

"Sandy wants to buy another house," Moe said.

"Not a bad idea. Interest on a real estate loan would all be deductible and you'll need all the deductions I can find."

"It won't work." Moe traced little patterns on the table with his finger. "I already tried. Sandy saw a house she liked last year, but I couldn't get a loan. The bank looked at my tax return and said that on my income I'd never be able to make the payments. They said I was lucky this one was paid off." Moe looked up from under his brows. "She don't understand why we can't just pay cash."

"Obviously that's no solution. That would just draw the attention of the IRS." Dennis slid smoothly into his pitch. "You're lucky I'm here to help. As I've said, my job is to find ways to absorb your cash cache..." Dennis paused and smiled ex-

pectantly but got no answering smile so he went on, "...without incurring undue tax burdens or penalties. In other words, we'll have to launder your money."

Moe's face darkened. "Launder my money? You mean like drugs? I don't want to get involved in anything illegal."

Dennis stared. *Dear God. The man doesn't want to get involved in anything illegal.* "No," he said, "the idea is not to spend that money, the idea is to invest it, but we have to make it appear that the money has been recently earned. We have to funnel it through some of your other enterprises."

"What other enterprises? I'm a plumber. I got one shop."

Dennis held up a hand. "Leave that to me." He went on to explain that the best thing would be to open at least one more business—one that didn't bring in much money—so they could start depositing the hidden cash disguised as income. At the same time, they'd keep expenses high to justify maximum business deductions.

"When we do your tax returns for last year," Dennis said, "we'll list every penny of income, and I'll take advantage of every conceivable deduction. You'll see a big difference in the amount you have to pay. Do you know what your income was last year?"

Moe scratched his bald spot. "It was a little over a hundred thousand, but I already paid my taxes for last year."

"For last year? But it's only January seventeenth."

"Yeah, well, Cora used to say if you file early and pay all you owe, they won't audit you."

Moe rose and lumbered over to a kitchen cabinet. "I think I got a copy of the return here." He pulled open a drawer, retrieved a document, and handed it across the table.

Dennis glanced at the paper. "You declared a little over fifty thousand. My God! This is a short form! It's a personal return! You paid nearly twenty thousand dollars' tax on an adjusted gross income of less than fifty thousand." He turned the form over in disbelief. "You didn't take any business deductions."

Moe shrugged. "I didn't want to do anything illegal."

Dennis stared. "Yes," he said finally. "Well, let me think about filing an amended return." He looked down at the blank legal pad. Should he make notes? *I should be able to remember a figure like eight hundred and ninety thousand, but how do I lay it off?*

He set his pen aside and folded his hands. "Mr. Carne-
lian, we have to get you incor-
porated and into a second
business. You should open an

other plumbing shop—one far enough away that you won't get referrals from your present clients. We want to keep income low and expenses high."

"I can't open a second shop. I can't hardly keep up with what I got."

"But you don't have to work it yourself. We'll send one of your men out to set it up."

Moe shook his head. "I only got five guys, and one of them is just a helper."

"But that's the idea. You don't want a business that's too successful. You want a business you can bank cash out of. We've got to start getting that money into circulation." Dennis snapped his fingers. "Didn't you say your daughter is working in the business now?"

Moe nodded. "Yeah, Natalie handles the phones and the paperwork down at the office."

"How about putting her in charge of the new shop? She knows the paperwork, she could take the orders and maybe even buy the materials."

Moe watched his finger tracing an invisible pattern on the table. "I don't know," he said. "I don't want her involved in laundering money and that stuff."

"So we won't tell her. She'll turn in the receipts, and you'll make the deposits. She doesn't have to know how much you deposit. We'll pay her a big sal-

ary—which will be deductible—and let her run the new shop with one plumber.” Dennis smiled and gave Moe a conspiratorial wink. “Let her write checks so she’ll feel like the boss. Trust me. I’ll bet the first year we can show expenses of forty or fifty thousand more than we take in, then pump in enough of your cash to show a modest taxable profit.” He smiled. “How’s that sound?”

Moe appeared bewildered. Dennis glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to run. I’ll stop by your shop tomorrow and pick up your books and the last four or five years’ tax returns.”

He closed the attaché case, stood up, and thrust out his hand. “Mr. Carnelian, you’re about to become a corporation. I’ll start the paperwork right away, and before you know it, you’ll be able to spend all the money you want to.” He turned, then stopped and snapped his fingers. “Oh, I almost forgot. I’ll need some money to draw up the incorporation documents and start the filing procedures, and we haven’t discussed my fee.”

Moe sat silently watching.

“Because of the great amount of work to be done and the care we must take to avoid any possibility of involvement with the IRS, my fee for the preliminary work will be five thousand dollars.”

Dennis paused and waited for a reaction. Moe didn’t move. “Of course, we’ll be able to deduct it as a business expense.” Moe looked down at the table but didn’t speak. Dennis cleared his throat. “I’m in a position to accept cash if you’d like to take care of it tonight.”

Moe sat motionless for a moment, then got to his feet and started toward the back of the house. He paused in the doorway, turned, sighed, and said, “Well, Jack said you were good at this sort of thing.”

Three months later, Dennis sat in his office turning pages in the Carnelian file and wondering how so many things could have gone wrong in such a short time. The setup had been perfect. There must be a mistake in these numbers, he thought, flipping back and forth through the file. I should have kept an eye on it, but good Lord, it started out so well.

He ran through a mental checklist of the things he’d done to insure a successful start to the venture. He’d persuaded Moe to lease a small building forty-five miles away in a corner of the San Fernando Valley inhabited mostly by wrecking yards and truck terminals. The tiny sign, stating simply PLUMBING CONTRACTOR, could barely be seen from the weed-

grown sidewalk, let alone the street.

They'd sent Natalie out to run the place with the help of Freddie, who usually managed to flood the floor and break at least one fixture on every job he tackled. There was no provision for advertising, and Dennis had figured that Natalie, who was attractive in a sort of frightened fawn fashion, was much too shy to find new clients.

Dennis watched the first two weeks of operation with delight. The few customers that had stumbled in had been furious at Freddie's fabled incompetence, and two were withholding payment for work improperly performed. The company was paying Freddie top journeyman wages, and as secretary-treasurer of the new corporation, Natalie was being compensated at a comfortable forty thousand a year. Since they were also overpaying on the building lease, Dennis figured there was no way the fledgling firm could make money. Once he'd satisfied himself that Natalie's shop was nicely in the red, he'd turned his attention to other clients with tax problems.

Now that April fifteenth had come and gone, Dennis had picked up the books from Moe and spent the morning going over the figures. He couldn't believe what he was looking at.

Running his finger down a column of expenses, he winced and reached for the phone. Several deep breaths forced him into a semblance of relaxed joviality.

"Moe, this is Dennis. I've been going over the books, and I am quite surprised. It appears Natalie's gone a little crazy out there."

"Yeah, ain't she something?" The pride in Moe's voice was evident even over the phone. Dennis gritted his teeth.

"I'm not sure 'something' quite covers it. It appears from the payroll statements that she fired Freddie and has hired some new people."

"Yeah, well, Freddie, he wasn't too good, as you know. For one thing he ripped out a wall of the ladies' room at the Cozy Corner Cafe to get at the pipes, and you could see right in there from the dining room." Moe chuckled. "It was kinda funny. The owner, he was gonna sue, so Natalie told Freddie he had to fix it and Freddie says he's not no carpenter, so she fired him."

"Fired him." Dennis's voice was distant. "And the new plumbers? Where did they come from?" He slumped in his chair and listened as Moe explained.

It seemed Natalie had run an ad in the paper and hired a widower in his late thirties who'd just moved to California. According to Moe's enthusiastic

report, Carl Petersen was not only an excellent plumber, he was personable. He had straightened out Freddie's messes and made friends for the firm in the process. But there was more.

With some encouragement from Petersen, Natalie had renamed the shop "Plumb Loco—Discount Plumbing," and got a local sign painter to put a sign on the roof almost as big as the building itself. She'd had flyers printed and distributed to all the local businesses and to a nearby tract of houses, and had taken a half-page display ad in the Yellow Pages.

The normally reticent Moe was practically bubbling as he recounted Natalie's innovations, her originality, her vision. In less than three months her shop was doing twice as much business as her father's, and she'd hired two more plumbers and three assistants. Now she wanted to open two more Plumb Loco outlets.

"Ain't she something?" Moe asked again.

Dennis shook his head wearily back and forth. "Yes . . . she's something, Moe, but I'm afraid we're not doing too well on our original objective. If you recall, the idea was to keep expenses high and income low so we could feed in a substantial part of your excess cash. Natalie is billing so much now that

I'll have my hands full just minimizing taxes on the legitimate income."

Moe's silence was irritating. "Do you understand?" Dennis said. "There's no way we can start depositing the cash through her shop without paying through the nose on your income tax, and she can't possibly bill as much as that money can earn."

Moe's reply was so subdued it made Dennis feel guilty.

"Yeah, well, I figure you'll think of something. Jack said you were good at this sort of thing."

"Is anything else wrong?" Dennis said.

"No, not really. It's just that since I been paying myself the big salary for being president of the company, Sandy's been spending it as fast as we make it." Moe sighed. "Clothes, parties, a decorator. Right now she's having new cabinets put in the kitchen."

"Yes . . . well, keep all the receipts. I can probably find ways to deduct a large portion of her purchases, but we don't want her spending it faster than we can show we made it. Let me think about it."

Dennis hung up scowling, and massaged his temples. *Damn! Jack says I'm supposed to be good at this sort of thing.* His mind searched for a solution for a few minutes; then he

reached for a pencil. *If Natalie's going to turn tycoon on me, I'll set Moe's shop up to show the losses. There's more than one way to skin the IRS.*

Normally Dennis Lockhart could be found at night at any of several of West L.A.'s better watering holes, but for the following two weeks he was conspicuous by his absence. He couldn't get his mind off all that cash and felt his reputation as a manipulator of monies was at stake. He even considered trying to set up an unnumbered account in the Bahamas, but doubted that Moe would agree.

His evenings were spent translating columns of numbers into charts and graphs to impress Moe and justify his fees. Eventually he came up with a schedule that would allow his client to liquidate the cash within the next three to five years without incurring any sizable increase in taxes, taking into account the shrinking volume of Moe's shop as well as the increase in business Natalie had generated.

When he was satisfied with his plan, he decided to drive out and surprise Moe. Before he got within a block he felt his muscles tense as he stared at the billboard-sized sign on top of the building. PLUMB LOCO—DISCOUNT PLUMBERS. The sign featured a caricature of a demented plumber hitting himself in the

head with a pipe wrench.

He walked into an air of organized confusion. Carpenters were putting the finishing touches on new partitions, and painters had covered the drab grey walls with a sparkling coat the color of rich cream. New tile gleamed on the floor. Natalie, garbed in a fitted powder blue jumpsuit with "Plumb Loco" embroidered over her heart, was directing the efforts of a workman installing a display cabinet on the wall of the reception area. Moe was nowhere in sight.

On the only other occasion when he had met Natalie, Dennis had thought her rather mousy looking. Large luminous brown eyes were the only feature that stood out in an undistinguished oval face framed with straight brown hair. They'd met the night Dennis had guided the family through their first corporate meeting. Dennis remembered thinking her simple blouse and plaid skirt resembled the uniform worn by Catholic schoolgirls.

At the meeting in Moe's kitchen, Moe was elected corporation president, and Sandy, who in short shorts spent the evening doing her nails, became vice-president. Natalie, the newly elected secretary-treasurer of Carnelian Corporation, looked at Dennis with curiosity when her father an-

nounced she would be in charge of a second shop, but then had spent the rest of the session listening intently, hands folded in her lap.

Could this be the same girl? She seemed quiet but assured as she explained to the workman why the cabinet should be moved three inches higher. Dennis tried to think what was different about her physical appearance, but aside from the absurdly cute coveralls, a splash of lipstick, and a shorter, softer hairstyle, she looked the same. No, the difference was in her manner. She turned in a sleek, flowing motion and saw him in the doorway. The mouse had become a cat. Natalie stepped forward smiling and thrust out a slender hand with nails painted the color of ripe raspberries.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Lockhart. How do you like the new look?"

Dennis, startled at her clairvoyance, blinked, then regained his composure. Obviously she meant the room. "Why, it's lovely." He favored her with his professional, winning smile. "But I'll admit I'm surprised. I thought your father was pretty content with things the way they were. Was this his idea?" He couldn't get over her eyes. He'd thought of them as frightened and timid, but now they seemed to draw him down and

in to deep pools of brown liquid enchantment.

Natalie laughed. "Of course not. Daddy bellowed like an old bull 'cause he didn't want to spend the money. Mama got him so used to doing without he won't even buy a new pair of shoes till the soles are flapping on his old ones." Her smile was warm, with just a trace of the former shyness. "Now that he's seen it, he loves it but doesn't want to admit it."

"Then this was your idea?"

"I'm afraid so." She shook her head. "Business here has dropped off terribly since I left, and poor Daddy doesn't seem to know what to do about it. It seemed silly not to do some of the things that have been working so well for us."

"Us?"

"Well, actually it was Carl's idea to fix up the other place and get a decent sign, but I was the one who got a package deal from the contractor to remodel all three places."

"Three? Did you say three?"

"Why, yes, hasn't Daddy told you? We leased a building in Glendale, and we'll have it ready to open by the end of the month. We'll all do much better if we take advantage of buying in volume, and the name I picked out is really catching on. Did you see the sign?"

"Yes. Yes, I did." Dennis nodded. "Plumb Loco. That's very

cute." He glanced down at the briefcase in his hand. *Two weeks' worth of work down the tubes.* He cleared his throat. "Uh, I take it Carl is Carl Petersen? The man you hired?"

"Oh, yes. Carl's been just marvelous. He was the manager for a very large plumbing contractor in Iowa, but his wife died last year and he just couldn't bear to live in the same house so he moved out here. We were really lucky to get him." Color glowed in her cheeks. "Jack Kirkpatrick is getting us some new trucks 'cause Carl has already lined up a deal to install plumbing in thirty new houses in Agoura. The general contractor has promised to use us on other new construction."

She seemed suddenly aware of Dennis's blank expression. "Oh, but I'm boring you. You came to see Daddy and here I am babbling, but he's not here. Sandy made him take her down to look at patio furniture. Can I give him a message?"

"No." Dennis glanced again at the briefcase. "It was nothing. I'll give him a call." He stepped back and nodded. "Nice to see you again, Natalie. By the way, that girl over there . . . is she new?"

Natalie laughed. "That's Sherry. I hired her two weeks ago. Can you believe Daddy has been trying to run this place without a girl since I left? No

wonder his business fell off. And Carl's been holding seminars with Daddy's men, showing them new materials and fixtures and how to install them." Her eyes sparkled as she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Even Daddy is learning new tricks. Carl is teaching them ways to get jobs done quicker."

"Quicker," repeated Dennis.

"Oh, yes. Carl says running up the time and going back and forth to the shop doesn't work if you want to stay competitive. We don't bill as much on each call because we get in and out a lot faster, but we're getting tons of referrals and repeat business."

"Marvelous," Dennis said. His smile looked more like a grimace as he left. He climbed into the car and belched. Maybe he was getting an ulcer. *I've got to get that money cleaned up. I've just got to get Moe into something that isn't making big profits.* As he put the car in gear, he glanced up and saw the Plumb Loco sign looming overhead. A small pain gripped his breastbone, and another burp escaped.

By fall they'd invested heavily in three more businesses. While Natalie and Carl were setting up a fourth successful plumbing outlet, Dennis had

gone looking for losers. He bought a printing firm that had never been much more than a small family business. Mr. Wilson, a sour, taciturn man who'd been losing business steadily to franchise printing companies in the area, agreed to accept the exorbitant amount Dennis offered him for the shop. Moe objected strenuously, but Dennis talked him into keeping Mr. Wilson on as manager and printer at a salary greater than he'd ever earned as owner.

By now the plumbing business was doing so well that Moe had no trouble getting a bank loan to buy the printing shop and open the fourth plumbing outlet. When the papers were signed for the print shop, a jubilant Dennis began immediately searching for another business that couldn't possibly make money.

He found an auto parts store with almost the same problem as the printer. The owner not only was unpleasant, he didn't carry enough inventory to meet half the needs of his customers. The less business he did, the less inventory he carried, but unlike Mr. Wilson, he refused to stay on as an employee. The corporation was growing, and Moe was finally able to start feeding small amounts of cash through the two new establishments.

Moe handled the banking.

The receipts for all the locations were turned in to him at least twice a week, and after conferring with Dennis, he'd add cash—usually only a few hundred dollars—to the deposits of the two new businesses. From the dates of the deposit slips, Dennis could tell that it sometimes took Moe several days to retrieve the money from its hiding place. Was it because it wasn't at the house after all, or was he just being careful around Sandy and Natalie?

A few weeks later, while going over the books, Dennis discovered that Natalie had involved herself in the printing business. Moe told him she was painting the place, and though it pleased Dennis when he saw the bills for the remodeling and decorating, it also sent little shivers of apprehension through him.

"I don't care how much she spends as long as it doesn't start making money," he told Moe. He laughed to show he was only joking and left to inspect the place. It was so different in appearance he almost drove by without seeing it.

Unlike the Plumb Loco locations, the decor was sleek and discreet; an all-white windowless exterior glistened in the sun and framed a door of brushed aluminum and glass. Beside the entrance, Dennis saw small raised silver letters

that read STERLING PRESS and, in even smaller letters below, EXCELLENCE IN PRINTING.

As he entered, his feet sank into thick carpeting, and he stopped in surprise. The counter was gone, and the clutter of signs and posters had vanished. A wall had sprung up between the shop and the office area, and Dennis could hear only faintly the rumble of the printing presses. Wallpaper in a tasteful floral pattern blended with the rose-colored carpet; oil paintings added the illusion of a living room. Natalie sat in the reception area at a cherrywood desk of antique design sorting work orders. She brightened and rose when she saw him.

"What do you think?" she said.

"Why, it's wonderful. Looks like it belongs in Beverly Hills. It's easily the classiest printing place I've ever seen."

Natalie beamed. "Good! That's the impression we want to give."

"It is?" His eyes traveled around the room, but without seeming to; he watched Natalie. "This is a far cry from Plumb Loco Discount Plumbers, isn't it?"

"Oh, sure, but this is a totally different problem." Natalie waved him to a mauve designer chair that was surprisingly comfortable. "You already know," she said, "that Mr. Wilson was going broke trying to

compete with the franchise chains on run-of-the-mill jobs that anyone can do, but were you aware there are probably fewer than a dozen printers in Southern California that can produce quality work equal to Mr. Wilson's? He's won award after award for excellence in printing." She picked up a lovely four color brochure and thrust it into his hands. "See? He did this. We made it our motto. Excellence in printing."

"He does four color printing? In this little shop?"

"Well, he can't do real large runs, but he does have a Koenig and Bauer press designed for color work. Mr. Wilson gets better color tones and definition than most of the big shops, and he won't let anything out that isn't perfect."

"But he was going broke. He was one step from bankruptcy."

Natalie's voice was patient. "That's because he's not very skillful with the public. Most of the people who used to come in didn't appreciate quality; they didn't care what it looked like as long as it was cheap."

Her silvery laugh sent a tingle through Dennis. "Heaven knows he won't lower his standards or his prices, but he's completely happy as long as he doesn't have to deal with customers."

Natalie glowed in her enthusiasm. Dennis momentarily lost

the thread of her explanation as he stared at the beige wool dress that flowed loosely about her, yet clearly defined the supple, voluptuous figure beneath. *How could I have ever thought she was mousy?* He pulled himself back to the conversation.

"Yes, well, you've certainly gone first class in fixing the place up." He nodded approvingly. "Good. Good. All deductible. It will take some time to get the place on its feet, and it'll take a lot of billing to offset the opening expense, but eventually it may even show a small profit." Dennis smiled warmly. "Does this mean you'll be involved here instead of at the plumbing business?"

Natalie shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm just working with the Wilsons until everything is running well. Mrs. Wilson is coming back to work full time tomorrow. *She likes dealing with people.* I'll be selling for them until I can find and train an outside representative."

Dennis chuckled. "Well, that will certainly add to overhead, and the IRS can't complain about money spent in an attempt to increase business."

Natalie laughed merrily at his little joke. "I know," she said, "isn't it marvelous? And when the printer I hired comes in tomorrow, that will increase overhead, too."

Dennis froze. "You hired an-

other printer? Why, for heaven's sake? There's not enough work here to keep Mr. Wilson busy."

"That *was* true, there wasn't before, but that's all changed now. We've got so many orders we can't possibly keep up with just one person in back. I'm looking for a third person to do the packing and delivering and pick up supplies."

"But . . . but how? He'd have been out of business in another three months if we hadn't bought him out." Dennis forced himself not to rub his breastbone where the burning sensation had suddenly reappeared. Natalie was happily oblivious to his discomfort.

"We decided to focus on the quality work that the other printers can't do. They've been turning down orders for color work and embossing, so I offered them our services. They accept work from their customers and farm the printing out to us. Then when we're overbooked—which is most of the time nowadays—we let them print some of our offset jobs."

She spread her hands in triumph and grinned. "They make money and we make money."

Dennis was dazed. *Where in hell did this girl learn so much about printing?* "Then the shop is actually increasing its billing?" he said.

"Oh my, yes. We'll do more

this month than they billed in the last six months, and we're really just getting under way. We can bring in lots of corporate business—embossed stationery, special calling cards, four color brochures—as soon as I get the right sales people.

"That's why we need extra people," she added, "and whether Daddy knows it or not, we owe it all to you. If you hadn't persuaded him to let me take charge of things, none of this would have happened." She leaned back and beamed.

Dennis couldn't remember ever experiencing such an odd combination of ecstasy and misery. Gas forced its way up from his stomach like bubbles in a simmery tar pot. Yet he had to fight the impulse to lean over and kiss the warm, sensitive lips. He tried to smile, but his facial muscles felt frozen.

Natalie leaned forward eagerly. "I'll bet you have a lot of questions, don't you?"

"Well, maybe one. Do you have any antacids in the office?"

It was a full week before he was able to face Moe. They met in the kitchen, but Dennis scarcely recognized the surroundings. Not only had the cabinets been replaced, but the sink, dishwasher, refrigerator, and floor tiles were all new. Twin ovens stared at him from

the opposite wall, and a copper hood gleamed over the new counter with built-in burners and rotisserie grill.

Moe watched as Dennis's gaze swept around the room, then leaned forward and announced in a stage whisper, "Paid for most of it in cash."

Dennis winced. "Look, Moe, the idea is to get that money invested—not spent. Once we get it into circulation you can spend the income it'll produce and live a life of comparative luxury."

Moe scowled. "Sandy thinks we should live a life of luxury now. She wants a swimming pool. And a Jaguar and a fur coat and everything else she sees." He peered up at Dennis. "She's taking golf lessons. Wants to join a country club. She's over there again tonight."

Dennis frowned. "She still doesn't know where the cash is, does she?"

"No, and she's not going to."

"Perhaps it's time to move the money to a safer place. Like a safe deposit box?"

"I told you I don't like banks." Moe's mulish expression invited no contradiction. "They make you fill out forms and sign in and sign out, and if you want to get at your money at night or on a weekend, you're outta luck."

"Yes, I see what you mean. Still," Dennis couldn't think

of a tactful way to express his misgivings, so he changed the subject. "I see the corporation leased you a new car."

Moe brightened. "Yeah, got us all one. I got Chevys for Sandy and Natalie from Jack Kirkpatrick. I was gonna get one for me, too, but Jack said a company president should be driving something better, so he got me a deal on a Caddy. Sandy says since she's vice-president she should be driving a Cadillac, too." Moe grinned. "I always wanted a Cad, but I never thought I'd have one. Are you sure we can charge it to the corporation?"

"Absolutely. As chief executive, you have to maintain an image, and the new companies require you to travel." Dennis closed the briefcase and stood up. "In fact, I'm searching for every possible deduction I can find. Between the plumbing chain and the print shop, you'll show an increase in income — legitimate income—of nearly one thousand percent. If I don't find ways to write it off, you could end up paying the government more this year than you made last year." He sighed. "That's why we're almost where we started with the cash. Thank God the auto parts store is losing money. I think you should increase the cash deposits there, but since Sterling Press is doing so well, we'll have to cut back

the money you've been feeding through them. I'm afraid it'll be a slow process."

Moe nodded slowly. "Well, Jack said you were good at this sort of thing."

Dennis hired a manager for the parts store who'd had five jobs in the past year. Mr. Glock showed no signs of initiative or competence, so it seemed unlikely that conditions would improve. But this time Dennis was determined to keep a close eye on things, so he dropped in three or four times a week to make sure business wasn't booming.

Mr. Glock, whose face was seamed with little purplish veins and who gave off a strong aroma of breath mints, didn't seem to care one way or the other. They kept a reasonable supply of accessories on hand and enough batteries and spark plugs to keep the place afloat, but customers were few and far between. Mr. Glock spent most of his time in the storeroom and seemed to like the solitude.

Dennis decided Moe could start depositing larger amounts of cash in December, but when he tried to call him to discuss it, Sandy told him Moe had taken his boat up to Lake Mead for a week of fishing. A few days later Dennis found a message on his answering machine. Moe had returned and wanted Den-

nis to meet him at the house at ten o'clock the next morning. Dennis thought he sounded tired from the trip.

The next morning was a beautiful California winter day, crisp and clear and just chilly enough to warrant turning on the car heater. Dennis found himself whistling as he headed towards Moe's house. At last they'd begin making real headway towards liquidating the money. He glanced at his watch and decided he had time to drop by to say hello to Mr. Glock. When he wheeled into the parking area in front of the parts store, the whistle died on his pursed lips. Natalie's fire-engine-red Camaro was sitting out front. A feeling of apprehension gripped him as he parked and went in.

Mr. Glock was nowhere in sight. Natalie and a pretty blonde were hunched over the counter in animated conversation, examining what appeared to be blueprints. The now familiar burning sensation climbed his breastbone as he approached.

"Good morning, Natalie. What brings you out here so bright and early?"

Natalie's startled expression melted into a warm smile, but she looked flustered. Dennis felt a vein in his temple pulse as he smiled back.

"Oh, hi, Dennis. I'd like you

to meet Karen. Karen, this is Mr. Lockhart, the man I was telling you about." Dennis nodded his head warily and mumbled something unintelligible.

Natalie stomped her foot and thrust out her lower lip in a most beguiling pout. "Oh, pooh, Dennis. This was supposed to be a surprise." She laid a slim hand on the other woman's shoulder. "Karen and I have been working on a plan for nearly a month, and I wanted to spring it on you and Daddy at the house this morning."

Dennis looked at the other woman, who eyed him back with friendly curiosity. She was taller than Natalie, with hair cut in a cap of short blondish curls. Her face, arms, and hands were deeply tanned. Dennis groped in his mind for a word to describe her. She was attractive, but she was also . . . she appeared to be . . . The only word he could think of was . . . competent! He turned back to Natalie.

"A surprise? What kind of surprise?"

"Oh, Dennis!" Natalie displayed her pretty pout again. "You're spoiling everything." Dennis's heart lurched as Natalie laughed and leaned across the counter to kiss him softly on the cheek. She turned to Karen. "If it hadn't been for Dennis, we wouldn't have anything. He talked my father into

putting me in charge of the expansion program and showed him possibilities he'd never have seen on his own. I know they'll love what we're planning to do here." The two women beamed.

Dennis's answering smile was tentative. "Just what *are* you planning to do here?"

"We-ell," Natalie said, "we're going to make this the first unisex auto parts store and repair facility in the city." They looked at Dennis's expression and burst out laughing.

"We expected this reaction," Natalie said. "Men don't think women can do much of anything mechanical, but Karen has been around cars all her life. Her dad is crew chief for Barney Calhoun—you know, the stock car race driver?—and Karen can tear an engine down and put it back together in an hour. Her boyfriend is a designer for GM. Karen knows everything there is to know about cars and what it takes to make them run." Natalie paused and glanced at her friend. "So-o-o, if you and Daddy approve, she's agreed to head up our expanded parts and service division."

"But I don't understand. You said unisex. What does sex have to do with auto parts?"

Karen spoke. "We're looking for the young professional market," she said. "Yuppies—if you will—of both sexes, but we're

particularly interested in the woman buyer." She glanced at Natalie as if looking for permission to continue. Natalie nodded.

"There are a lot of women out there," Karen said, "who live by themselves and own cars. They're intimidated by the all male establishments they find when they go looking for parts and service. At best they feel patronized, and at worst they get cheated. We plan to staff both the store and the service division with male *and* female help. We want our customers to be able to ask questions of either a man or a woman and get friendly, expert answers either way. If it goes as well as we think it will, we'll be looking to open franchise outlets."

Dennis rubbed his wishbone absently. "I see. But won't you lose a lot of male trade?"

The girls laughed. "What trade?" Natalie said. "Where can the business go but up?" Suddenly concern flooded her face as she saw Dennis's expression. "Are you feeling all right? Would you like a drink of water?"

"No, no, I'm fine." Dennis jerked his hand away from his chest and forced a smile.

"As part of our advertising and publicity campaign, Karen has already lined up several race drivers to make commercials and in-store appearances

when we're ready. That should bring in the macho guys in spite of the name."

"The name? What name?"

The girls looked at each other again and giggled. Natalie said, "We wanted a name that people would remember. Something a little silly like Plumb Loco, but one women could identify with. What do you think of Dilly Dilly Auto Service?"

"Dilly Dilly Auto Service," Dennis repeated through pursed lips. He looked as if he'd just swallowed a lemon. "Natalie, we have to talk." He glanced at his watch. "We have an appointment with your father. I'll meet you out there." He nodded vaguely in Karen's direction. "Nice to meet you Miss . . . uh . . . Karen." He turned and strode toward the door.

In the car Dennis shoved his foot all the way to the floor as he headed up the freeway ramp. Pounding his fist against the steering wheel, he ignored the blaring air horns and raced to beat the oncoming eighteen wheeler to the end of the narrowing lane. *Dilly Dilly Auto Service! How stupid can you get? Natalie is going too far.*

And yet . . . a grudging smile of admiration flickered across his lips. I have to admit Plumb Loco Discount Plumbers is booming, and Sterling Press is about to outgrow their building. What if Natalie's right about

unisex auto service? But what do we do about the cash?

He gave the steering wheel another whack with the heel of his hand. How could anyone with an angel face like Natalie's be giving him ulcers? He wanted to turn her over his knee and spank her, and at the same time he wanted to feel her slender, supple warmth pressed against him. He wondered if her dark, wavy hair would feel as silky under his fingers as it had looked when she leaned over to kiss his cheek.

Abruptly he snapped back to reality. *I wonder if Moe'll kill me when I tell Natalie about the cash?* He glanced down at the speedometer and discovered he was doing almost eighty in a fifty-five an hour zone. Glancing in the mirror, he slowed and began searching his mind for the words he would use to let Natalie know what was going on. *Natalie, are you aware we have a problem? Or, Natalie, we're trying to lose money, not make it.* Perhaps he could say, *Natalie, your father has something he wants to discuss with you.* Dennis grimaced and belched. *Christ! I can't ask Moe's permission to tell her—he'll blow his top. But we've got to tell her 'cause there's no way we can absorb the money without making Natalie a part of the plan. She's the one running the company for Chrissake.*

The beep of a horn behind him caused him to look again at the speedometer, and he was startled to see it read thirty-eight miles an hour. He flipped a finger at the horn honker but stepped down hard on the gas.

He wondered how Natalie would take it. Would she be shocked? She has a practical side, he thought, but she's so damn innocent. She could end up hating her old man or even blaming me. At the thought, a stab of pain shot through his chest. He turned to glare at the driver beeping the horn and discovered Natalie smiling and waving as she sped ahead.

When he reached the house, he found Moe sitting at the umbrella table on the tiny patio and Natalie just pulling up a chair. There was a tractor-backhoe parked in the yard next to a large raw hole. There were other holes and heaps of dirt in the yard. Sandy's swimming pool, Dennis guessed.

It was only ten thirty, but a less than full bottle of Jack Daniel's sat on the table and Moe had a glassful in his hand. Natalie sank slowly into a chair, staring at her father with an apprehensive expression. Moe was scrutinizing the backhoe and didn't look up as Dennis joined them.

Had Dennis not been so focused on thoughts of the money, he might have seen the strange,

faraway look on Moe's face or the concern on Natalie's. Instead he plunged in. "Moe, I know you didn't want her involved, but Natalie has to know about the cash." He braced himself for an outburst but was totally unprepared for the cynical little bark of laughter.

"No point in telling her now," Moe said. He waved a hand aimlessly at the backhoe.

Comprehension dawned slowly in Dennis. "I . . . I don't understand."

Natalie spoke quietly. "I think I do. It was Sandy, wasn't it, Daddy? Did she find all the money?"

"Not quite. There's still a few thousand in the house." Moe turned and stared at his daughter. "You knew about the money?"

Natalie nodded. "Sandy told me. She thought I already knew, and she was trying to find out where you'd hidden it."

"When? How long have you known?"

"About two years." She leaned across the table and took her father's hand. "But it doesn't matter. You don't *need* that money. Don't you see? That's why Carl and I have worked so hard. We wanted to build the business for you so you wouldn't have to be dependent on that money."

Dennis was in shock. We? Carl and I? He tried to think of

something to say, but all that came out was, "Is Sandy gone?"

Moe sighed. "Yeah, she's gone. She and the pool guy. She talked me into going fishing 'cause she knew if I was here I wouldn't let her dig up the back yard for a pool, and then I guess her and the pool guy found some of the money and dug around till they found the rest of it. I had it in those big wide-mouthed jars buried around the yard." Moe took a deep pull on his Jack Daniel's. "She left a note. Said not to bother trying to find them."

"Have you called the police?" Dennis said.

"For what? To tell them my wife stole money I wasn't supposed to have?" Moe took a healthy swig of his drink and grinned. "You know, I been sitting here thinking I should be sore or sad or something, and all I feel is relieved. I knew Sandy was cattin' around, and when she was here, she was bitchin' all the time." He stretched out and put his feet on another lawn chair. "At least I don't have to listen to her bitchin' any more."

"But the money," Dennis objected. "She got away with nearly a million dollars."

"So what good was it doing me? I never wanted all that cash in the first place. It was Cora's idea. She was the one always worrying about money."

He turned to Dennis. "To tell you the truth, I'm kinda glad it's gone. All those sneaky deposits and the talk about money laundering was making me nervous."

"Yes," Dennis said. He couldn't think of anything to add. Over eight hundred K gone. Vanished. Disappeared. He looked up to see father and daughter watching him and smiling. Was there some joke he wasn't in on? Dennis forced himself to speak. "Well, it doesn't look like you'll have any serious tax problems after all."

Moe and Natalie looked at each other and laughed, then turned back to Dennis, smiling. "I don't think we'll starve to death," Natalie said. Her eyes sparkled. "But does this mean we won't need your services any longer?"

"No, no! It doesn't mean that at all," Dennis licked his lips and felt a schoolboy rush of blood to his face as he looked at Natalie. "As a matter of fact, the company is growing so fast I think it would be a good idea if you and I started spending more time together." He swallowed and with an unconscious gesture smoothed his hair. "Perhaps we could have dinner tonight and discuss the new direction the company seems to be taking."

Dennis watched Natalie's face anxiously, afraid she would

laugh at his suggestion, but to his horror he saw something much worse. Her tender, pitying smile turned his heart to ice.

"Why, that's very thoughtful of you, Dennis, but I won't be able to make it tonight. My fiancé and I have other plans."

Dennis felt as if all the weight of his upper body were draining down to his buttocks and pinning him to the lawn chair. He was surprised his voice sounded so casual. "Fiancé? Oh, I wasn't aware. Anyone I might know?"

"Why, yes. You met Carl, I believe. Carl Petersen? The man who's running the plumbing operation for Daddy?"

"Of course," Dennis murmured. "Carl. The man whose wife died." He took a deep breath, straightened in his chair, and pasted on a smile.

"But I believe the question was raised as to whether or not you would still have need of my

services." Turning to Moe, Dennis slipped into his smooth professional manner with practiced ease. "More than ever, I would say. Why, just this morning Natalie and I were discussing the feasibility of a major expansion and facelift of the auto parts store." The pain in his chest seemed to be subsiding, but it was only with an effort that he could look at Natalie.

"If we go ahead, we're going to require additional capitalization; and there's the possibility of creating a subcorporate structure. In view of what has just happened, it's more important than ever that you not give the IRS any more than they're entitled to; so I'd say you definitely need my services."

Moe and Natalie looked at each other and laughed. Moe shook his head in admiration. "Jack said you were good at this sort of thing."

(continued from page 4)

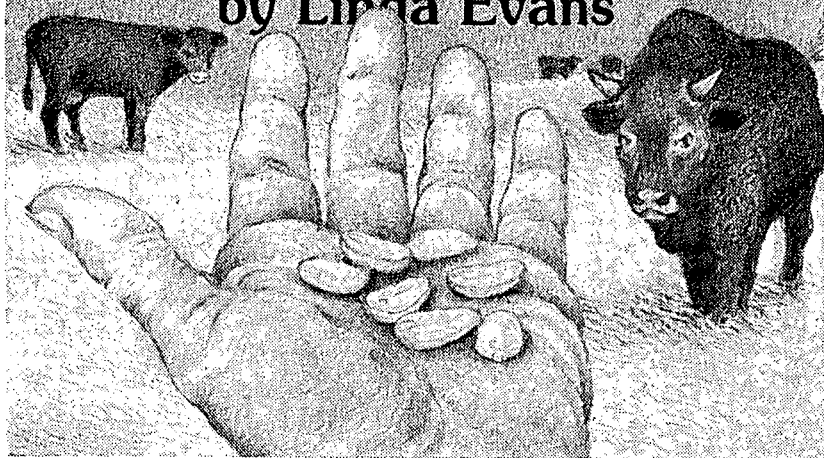
Our list this year contains twenty-six first stories, meaning that in 1990 AHMM averaged two new writers of mystery stories per issue. Though we don't have an official "Depart-

ment of First Stories" by which to highlight them, as does our sister magazine *Ellery Queen*, we thought you'd like to know.

We are, of course, rooting for all of them!

Have You Herd?

by Linda Evans



Uncle Bert fished a handful of peanuts out of the pocket of his baggy gray shirt. "Come on, Sue. Come on, old girl."

Neil guided his uncle up to the corral fence. Black cows milled around inside. The bull, also shiny black, stood a little apart from the cows. He rolled his eyes, showing a lot of white around the rims, and tossed his head, flinging a strand of green slobber back onto his shoulder.

"Sue, come get your treat," Uncle Bert said. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe Sue isn't hungry," Neil suggested.

His uncle snorted. "Hungry's got nothing to do with it. Old Sue's always ready for peanuts. Now where is she?" He lifted his head almost as though he were sniffing the air.

Neil quickly counted the cows, jabbing his finger at each one to keep track as they moved. Fifteen, same as always.

"She ain't here, is she?"

"Take it easy, Uncle Bert. I just counted. There's fifteen black cows and a black bull."

"I don't care how many cows there are. Sue ain't here or she'd have done took her treat. She takes it right out of my hand with that old rough tongue of hers. Then she bumps her head against

my chest so I can scratch behind her ears." Uncle Bert's voice had risen in pitch as he spoke, and now he jabbed his cane into the ground to punctuate his final word.

"Ouch!" Neil jerked his foot back, out from under the cane. "Sure she's here, she's got to be."

"Take me back to the house and call Sheriff Mason. Sue's gone."

Neil shook his head as if to clear it. He put his hand on his uncle's shoulder. "How do you know? You're blind, Uncle Bert."

"I just told you. Now stop being pigheaded and do as I say, or I'll just turn around and head back the way we came until I run into the side of the house. Then I'll feel my way around to the door. Do my own calling."

The old man broke away from Neil's grasp and started, half walking, half stumbling as he tripped over a clod of dirt. Neil caught up with him and tapped his uncle's elbow. "All right, I'll do as you say."

Neil hadn't bargained for this when he'd agreed to come live with the old man. He'd been freshly discharged from the army and wondering what to do with the house he'd inherited from his parents. The girl he'd been engaged to had decided in his absence to marry a magician she'd let cut her in half at a party. She hadn't bothered to tell him till he showed up back in town.

He'd hung around drinking in his inherited house for a week, not knowing what else to do, until the letter from Uncle Bert's lawyer finally reached him. Uncle Bert was blind now and too old to look after his small farm. His hired hand had moved on, leaving him alone. As Neil's only living relative, he wanted to offer Neil a place to stay in exchange for Neil's helping him out.

Neil took almost a week to make up his mind. He'd only seen his uncle once, the summer he was nine, when his parents had decided Neil might like a trip to Florida while they fought over their marriage. Neil's happy visions of palm trees and sandy white beaches evaporated into heat-shimmered air when he arrived at the farm located only a few miles north of the Everglades.

Except for several dozen acres of cleared land around the house and barn, slash pines and scrubby palmettos formed the landscape as far as Neil could see. A blast of hot, humid air hit him in the face as soon as he stepped out of the air-conditioned bus. All summer Uncle Bert had been kind, if too vague to take much notice of him. Neil had finally returned home to newly divorced parents.

If his ex-girlfriend hadn't shot him a look of pity when she saw Neil walking out of the package store with yet another bottle of

cheap wine, he'd have told Uncle Bert he could look for another hired hand. But he pictured Marie going home to the Amazing Arnold, Master of Illusion, and telling him all about how Neil had sunk to the gutter. He figured he had, he just didn't want Marie pitying him.

Next day he called Uncle Bert. Now here he was trying to convince the stubborn old man that all of his cows were right out in the corral where they belonged.

Uncle Bert stomped into the living room. "You tell the sheriff that's the best Angus cow ever walked this county and I want her back."

Neil sighed and dialed the sheriff's number, penciled on the wall just above the number for Sammy's Barber Shop. He wondered if Uncle Bert did this kind of thing often.

"Hello, Sheriff Mason?"

"Yes, that's me," a voice boomed out of the receiver.

"This is Neil Sullivan—Bert Sullivan's nephew."

"Yeah, I heard his nephew was coming to look after him. What's the problem? Old Bert finally up and die?"

Neil blinked in confusion. "No. Sorry to bother you. It's one of my uncle's cows. He claims she's missing, but I counted and there's sixteen, uh, Anguses. Counting the bull." Neil wondered if he should have said Angi or even Angeeses to pluralize Angus. The summer heat must be charbroiling his brain already.

"Let's see if I've got this straight. Bert has sixteen in his herd. You counted sixteen, but he says there's one missing." A soft whistle sounded over the line. "If that don't beat all."

"Look, sheriff, my uncle's an old man."

Neil ducked as Uncle Bert whipped his cane back and forth like a sword, coming perilously close to Neil's head.

"I may be old, but I ain't senile."

Neil heard the sheriff chuckle. "Tell Bert I heard him and I'll be out after awhile."

Sheriff Mason shortened his stride to stay even with Neil and his uncle as they made their way out to the corral. Neil had tried to persuade Uncle Bert to stay inside out of the sun, but his uncle had cut him off with a shouted, "I ain't no pat of butter." This time Neil knew to duck before the cane cut the air in his direction.

"Well," the sheriff said, coming to a halt in front of the corral gate. "Did you say these were Angus cows, Bert?"

"Jack, you know I got the finest little herd of black Angus in Southern Florida." Uncle Bert felt around in front of him until his hand touched the top rail of the wooden corral. Then he pulled away from Neil and leaned on the fence.

"I know an Angus when I see one, Bert. There's nothing in this corral but a bunch of scrubs, and that scrub bull in with them is the worst of the lot."

"Dang it, boy!" Uncle Bert turned sightless eyes in Neil's direction. "You let rustlers make off with my herd!"

Neil's stomach tightened. "How can you blame me, Uncle Bert? You said look after the cows. I saw fifteen black cows and a black bull. Now you say they're not your cows."

"Don't you understand?" Uncle Bert growled. "Just because a cow is black don't make it a black Angus. Black Angus are special. Sheriff says these cows are scrubs."

"They are that," the sheriff said. "Not only scrubs, but half of them aren't cows at all. They're steers."

"I didn't notice," Neil mumbled. "I'm sorry."

Briefly he considered re-enlisting in the army. He was obviously a lot better at piloting a helicopter than he was at herding cows.

No, he reminded himself. He couldn't stand the rules and regulations when he was in the army. Besides, Uncle Bert needed him. He grinned ruefully. He was starting to think maybe it was the other way around. The herd had been rustled right under his nose, and it had taken a blind man to discover the crime.

"Bert, when was the last time you were sure your own cows were in the corral?" Sheriff Mason asked.

"Well, let's see. When did you bring me down here last, Neil? Was it Monday or Tuesday?"

"Tuesday," Neil said. "Monday was the day I got here and it was after dark. We went out to the corral next morning."

"Yeah, and old Sue come right up to me for her handful of peanuts," Uncle Bert said.

"Today's Thursday, so that was two days ago." Mason pulled a little notebook out of his pocket and wrote something down. "You water the cows every day, Neil?"

"Yes. Late every afternoon."

"But you wouldn't know an Angus from a scrub?"

Neil felt his face turn hot. "Not if they were all black, no," he admitted.

The sheriff chuckled. Neil saw his uncle tighten his grip on his cane as though he were going to swing at Sheriff Mason for not

taking the loss seriously enough. He almost wished Uncle Bert would go ahead.

"I expect my cows—Sue and Annabelle and Darlene, all of them—are gone. Just like Percy."

Lord, Neil thought, feeling a wave of pity for his uncle. They all had names, too. Somehow that made his lax cowkeeping seem that much worse.

"Two days, that's quite a head start, Bert."

"You could check all the auctions around here," Uncle Bert said. "That's where I'd start."

"Sure," Mason said soothingly. He looked at Neil over the old man's head and shrugged.

That must mean he thought, as Neil did, that the situation was pretty hopeless. He escorted his uncle back to the house and then watched out the window as the sheriff drove away, bouncing his patrol car over the rutted driveway.

"I'm sorry," he told his uncle again. He plopped down across from the old man on the sagging couch.

Uncle Bert sighed. "I reckon I'm over being mad with you, Neil. It ain't your fault a city boy can't tell cows apart."

"Maybe I wasn't meant to stay here," Neil said, suddenly giving voice to his doubts. "Like you said, I'm a city boy. Uncle Bert, I was all thumbs the first time I was here, remember?"

Uncle Bert's weathered face crinkled into a smile. "Boy, you sure kept us amused. Me and your Aunt Kate. I thought I'd tie myself in knots I laughed so hard that day you got trapped out in the pasture with the bull."

"That was one mean bull," Neil said indignantly. He'd felt as though he were in a nightmare, fighting his way through scrub-brush and palmettos to reach the safety of the barn while the bull trotted after him, occasionally stopping to lower his head and paw the ground.

"First time I ever seen a boy run without his feet touching the ground," his uncle went on.

"Last time I ever got on the same side of a fence with a bull."

"Aw, boy. The bull I got now, he ain't like that. Sure, he naturally gets a little protective about his cows, but you just call his name, talk to him, and he won't hurt you."

Neil didn't remind Uncle Bert that the bull he had now wasn't his usual Angus but a scrub who looked as though he'd enjoy fresh human steaks any time of the day.

"Those were good days. I don't suppose I ever told you, boy, how

much I liked having you around that summer." The old man stopped talking and cleared his throat.

Neil looked away in embarrassment. "I never knew," he said honestly.

A pang of guilt stabbed him as he remembered refusing to go back to the farm. It wasn't really the farm, it was the loneliness. He remembered lying in his bed at night listening to the drone of millions of insects. He'd ached then for his friends back home, but most of all he missed his parents' marriage. Somehow he'd known before going back that things would never be the same.

He'd been too worried to enjoy the farm. Later his mind had performed the trick of associating the emptiness inside himself not with the loss of his family but with the farm. He could never bring himself to face those feelings again. Until now. And then he wasn't facing anything, he was running away from the loss he'd had back home. Would he ever feel a part of something again?

"Family. It means a lot to me." Uncle Bert rubbed his hand over the knotted surface of the cane lying across the arm of his chair. "You're my only kin now, boy, and I kind of figured it'd be nice if we spent some time together before I pass on. As long as you don't mind a crotchety old goat like me."

"Uncle Bert . . ."

"I know you don't care for farm life, but I won't be around much longer. You can sell out when I'm gone, use the money to make a start in the city."

Neil swallowed hard at a lump in his throat. He'd stay as long as his uncle wanted him. After that—well, the idea of selling out didn't sound so bad. He was useless at farming, and he knew that no matter what he did, he was a source of amusement for the people around here.

Sheriff Mason called early the next morning to report that he had nothing to report. "Dang it," Uncle Bert said. "I mighta known Jack couldn't find my herd. He couldn't find his car in his driveway if you gave him written directions. You might as well go down to the corral and see if whoever took my cows brought them back last night."

"You mean you think they were joking or something, Uncle Bert?"

"'Course I don't think it was a joke. Ain't nothing funny about it. But maybe whoever it was thought twice about what he done." Uncle Bert waved the cane threateningly.

"Did you forget? I can't tell your cows from the scrubs," Neil reminded his uncle.

"Don't be silly, boy. Just take a pocketful of peanuts down there with you. And then take a good look at them animals. Time you started noticing things."

Neil didn't need to offer peanuts to any of the cows. This time he noted that a number of them were indeed steers. The bull approached the fence, close enough to make Neil jump back as the animal lowered his massive head and snorted.

Just to make sure, Neil called, "It's all right, Percy. I'm not out to hurt your cows."

The bull charged forward, ramming a massive shoulder into the fence and causing the top rail to hum like a guitar string. Neil grinned. "Just checking. I knew all along you weren't Percy."

He shook his head on his way back to the house. It was weird enough that his uncle named his cows Sue, Annabelle, and Darlene. But Percy? What a name for a bull.

Angusless days passed. Uncle Bert alternated between telling Neil he ought to poke grits up his nose so at least he'd have something between his ears and assuring him that losing the cows didn't matter. Neil kept busy both inside the house and out. He found himself growing used to the merciless heat of the sun as he drove the tractor around the field he was clearing.

The scrub cows were moved at Uncle Bert's bidding to a pasture far from the house. "I don't even like to hear them bellowing," Uncle Bert said. "Dadburned things even moo like scrubs."

Neil drove the ancient pickup into town one day to pick up groceries. He caught himself inspecting everyone's boots as though he'd recognize the leather if it came from Uncle Bert's cows. As he was climbing into the pickup to go home, he saw Sheriff Mason sauntering out of the diner.

The sheriff raised an eyebrow and tossed a toothpick into a pot of geraniums on the sidewalk. "Looks like farm life is treating you all right. How's Bert?"

"Good, I guess. He never has quite gotten over my losing his cows."

"He wouldn't. Those animals were his pets. Strange case, though. They never turned up at a sale."

Neil frowned. "They wouldn't necessarily, would they? I mean, wouldn't the thieves have butchered them?"

Sheriff Mason laughed. "You sure don't know much about cattle. Why would rustlers go to all the trouble of changing one herd for another if all they were going to do was turn the cows into beef? No, what they planned to do is get those animals to an auction, fake papers, and sell them as breeders. Can't understand why they never turned up, though."

"Maybe they decided to keep them and breed them themselves."

"Maybe. More chance of getting caught, though, especially if they stuck around here. Not too many purebred Angus around."

Neil stared after him as the sheriff strode away with a final wave of his hand. The thieves had probably trucked the cattle away the night they'd stolen them. But what if they hadn't? What if the news got out first? They'd be afraid then. Uncle Bert's cows might still be in the county, grazing in someone else's pasture.

This was a big county, though. It would be impossible to search the thousands of square miles, especially with so much of it scrubland. Unless . . . a person could see a lot more with an air search. Neil's face broke into a lip-splitting grin. "That's it!" he crowed out loud. A woman passing by eyed him as though she wondered if he'd just escaped from his keeper, and Neil shrugged sheepishly.

Next morning Neil didn't tell Uncle Bert why he had to leave for the day. There was no point in disappointing the old man. He dropped a handful of peanuts into his pocket on the way out.

Hours later, airborne in a rented chopper, he felt as though his eyeballs would come unglued from so much searching over country that looked depressingly the same. He'd never realized that all cows looked pretty much the same color from the air.

The herd he was studying now looked black all right, but there were only ten, huddled together at the edge of a pond. He'd started to zoom off when a few stragglers joined the first group. With a sigh, he turned for another pass and then dropped lower. The cattle were black, though Neil had been too busy flying the chopper to get an accurate count. The biggest animal lifted a massive head and bellowed at him. Something about the bulk of the shoulders told Neil that this was a bull.

He remembered a clearing about a half mile away and set the chopper down, just missing a palmetto that was taller than it looked from the air. He'd promised himself once that he'd never again be on the same side of the fence with a bull and now here he was, trudging across rattlesnake-infested wilderness just to get a close-up look at one.

The cows spotted him and started drifting away, sending startled

glances over their shoulders as they stumbled through the palmettos. Two of them had calves, making the total herd count eighteen. Neil pondered. He still didn't know Angus from non-Angus. He could go back for the sheriff, but the thought of dragging the sheriff out here for what was probably nothing just didn't appeal.

Then he remembered the peanuts. He filled his palm with peanuts from his shirt pocket and held it out in front of him. "Here, Sue, come on and get your treat." Neil couldn't help looking around to make sure no one was watching. For all he knew, some Audubon diehard was perched in a pine tree behind him clutching a pair of high-powered binoculars and a tape recorder.

One of the cows in the pack stopped and heaved her bulk around to face him. She mooed tentatively, and Neil resumed his calling. Slowly, her head half lowered in suspicion, the cow approached. Finally she was close enough to stretch her neck forward and lick the peanuts off of Neil's hand.

"Good old Sue," Neil said out loud. He couldn't wait to give Uncle Bert the good news. He scratched her briefly behind the ears before shooing her away and heading for the chopper at a trot.

"Go away, Sue," he called over his shoulder as hoofbeats sounded behind him. To Neil's annoyance the hoofbeats sounded closer. Neil glanced back and then his mouth turned dry as powder. That wasn't Sue behind him now. It was—Percy.

The old panic Neil had felt so many years before seized him and his first impulse was to run. He knew he hadn't a prayer of reaching the chopper before the bull galloped over the top of him like a runaway tractor trailer. And running might cause the animal to go into an all-out charge. Then he remembered that Uncle Bert had said the bull responded to his name.

"Good old Percy," Neil singsonged. "Nice old Percy. Percy, Percy, go on back."

Neil kept trotting forward, the chopper seeming to remain always at the same distance in front of him as though it were a cruel mirage. He thought he could feel the bull's hot breath on his neck. "Percy, go to your cows. Percy, Percy," he gasped out, repeating the bull's name in case the animal hadn't heard.

The bull's stride shortened and then he stopped all at once as though someone had pressed a switch. With a final flick of his tail, the massive animal turned and galloped back to his cows. Neil wiped a hand across his sweaty forehead. Good thing he'd remembered Uncle Bert's advice. He couldn't get the chopper in the air fast enough.

“We’ll have your herd back here in the morning, Bert,” Sheriff Mason said, grinning as though he were the one who’d solved the case. “It turns out Obie Wells and his brother Columbus were the rustlers. They figured the coast was clear on account of Neil here didn’t know nothing about cows and you being blind. Just like I figured, they were going to fake papers and sell the herd at auction.”

“Never did like those two,” Uncle Bert broke in. “Couple of out-laws from the day they was born.”

“Thing they didn’t count on, though, was that you’d find out so soon that they’d traded their herd for yours. When I put out the bulletin the day after it happened, they didn’t dare try to move the cows out of the county. They were waiting for the fuss to die down.”

Neil massaged his knee. He’d tripped climbing back into the chopper.

“How’d you know they were my cows, Neil?” Uncle Bert asked, poking Neil’s shoulder with his cane.

“Well, I’ve learned a few things since I arrived, Uncle Bert.” Neil kept his voice soft, not wanting to boast. He scooted farther along the couch out of cane range.

“Have you, boy?”

“Sure,” Neil grinned. “I remembered to take peanuts for Sue.”

“That was smart of you. Getting to be a regular farm boy.”

“Yeah. Lucky thing I remembered something else, too.”

“What was that?”

“I remembered you said the bull would calm down when you called his name. That saved my life. He charged after me and I yelled, ‘Percy, Percy’ all the way back to the chopper until he heard me and stopped.”

Sheriff Mason frowned. Uncle Bert tapped his cane on the floor and said, “Percy? That old bull’s name is Goliath.”

Neil felt a good portion of his blood drain toward his boots. “But you said Sue and Annabelle and Darlene were gone, just like Percy. Don’t you remember?” he squawked.

“Sure, Neil, but all I meant was, they were gone. Like Percy, my hired hand that moved away. You mean you called that bull Percy and he let you get away with it?”

Sheriff Mason and Uncle Bert roared with laughter. This time Neil joined them after only the slightest hesitation.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

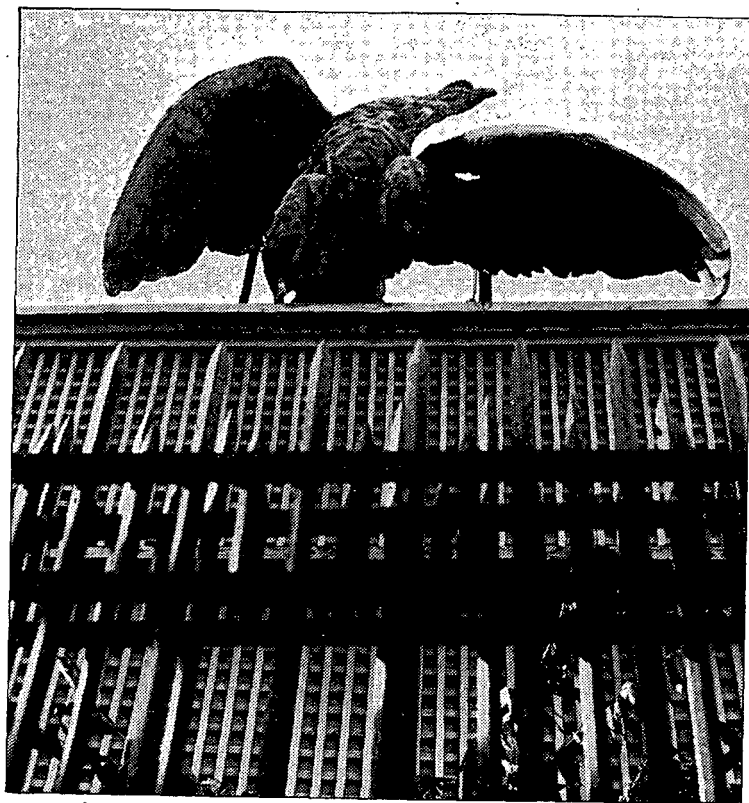


Photo by Algimantas Kerys

CHICKENS HATCH A MAJOR PLOT AGAINST MANKIND. (Tomorrow's headline—if there *is* a tomorrow?) We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

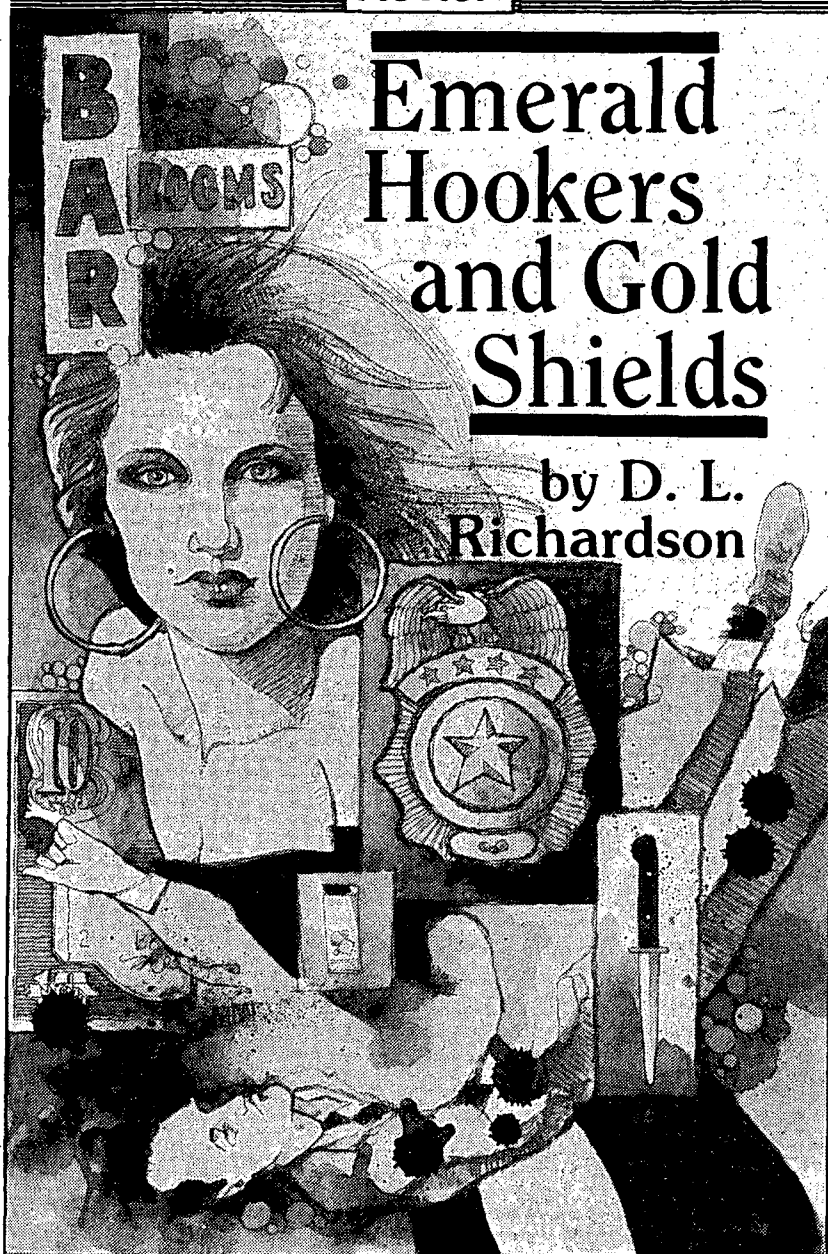
FICTION

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ROOMS

Emerald Hookers and Gold Shields

by D. L.
Richardson



Why couldn't Dixon keep his problems to himself? And if he couldn't keep them to himself, why did he have to come to me for help? All I wanted was to get on with my life, run a great little restaurant, forget the ambush that put an end to my career as a cop.

So far I'd been doing a pretty good job. Just ask Tad, my friend and half owner of Dillon's. Then Dixon showed up. An unwelcome blast from the past ruining a perfectly good Tuesday.

In the first place, he should have known better. In the second place, he was a cop. He could have handled it himself and been faster about it. All that information just a computer entry code away.

"But you're a woman, Dillon," he protested.

"And here I thought all this time you had never noticed."

"You know what I mean." He looked around at the servers, who were giving us a wide berth while they finished their pre-opening chores. "You'll be discreet."

"You should have considered discreet before you picked up a hooker."

"I told you. I was after information."

"Most cops use a twenty dollar bill. Budget cuts got you guys offering your—uh—ser-

vices? Must have been one surprised hooker."

"Ah, come on, Cassie. Cut me some slack. This is serious."

It certainly was. Cops usually lost their gold shields through suspension or dismissal. Sometimes an officer-down situation resulted in a stolen shield. But this—at the very least this would get Dixon an official reprimand, which would just about negate any chances for promotion. Not that the beefy, sandy-haired cop was necessarily headed for bigger and better things. At the worst—well, a gold shield in the hands of the wrong person could cause all kinds of PR nightmares for a profession constantly fighting for favorable press even on good days.

I didn't like to consider what crimes could be committed with the aid of Dixon's detective shield, what crimes could have already been committed. What was I thinking about? I was a private citizen now, had been for nearly two years. What did I care?

"Why me, Dixon? You could do it yourself or get one of your buddies to help."

"I can't go to work without my shield." He leaned over the table for two next to the bar. "I have to be in court all day Thursday and maybe part of Friday. I'm taking the rest of the week as vacation."

"I repeat. Why me?"

"I told you. You'll be discreet." His green gaze was intent. "I can trust you."

Trust. There was a word I no longer used in the same sentence with police department.

"You never went in for all the juvenile razzing," he continued. "You knew when to keep your mouth shut. What happened two years ago—"

"Is old news," I snapped. "It has nothing to do with now."

Which was a lie. It had everything to do with now, with who and what I was.

"I'd be asking the same favor if you were still on the force." He hurried on. "Besides, you know this kid. It's Emerald."

Chronologically, Emerald could be considered a kid. But at nineteen, she'd already been on the street for four years, hooking for three and a half of that. Old beyond her years. A runaway that got away. A kid I couldn't reach.

"Find her yourself."

"What do you think I've been trying to do since Saturday night?" He realized his raised voice had filled the customerless dining room. "I've looked everywhere I know to look. She's disappeared."

"Does her disappearance have anything to do with the information you were trying to get from her?"

"Yes, but I can't tell you any-

thing about that. It's police business."

"Dixon, how am I supposed to find her if I don't know why she's hiding?"

"Does this mean you'll do it? You'll find Emerald and get my shield back?" No beaver was ever more eager.

I looked around the still quiet restaurant. Coping with the lunch crowd would be no problem. One of the servers could double as hostess. But there was still plenty to do, once the noon rush was over, to get ready for our regular Tuesday Little Italy Night. I did some quick calculations and thought about my failure with Emerald. Then I gave myself a mental kick.

"I'll try."

Since my separation from the police department—that was their euphemism for my decision to take the disability pay and split—I didn't go into the city any more than absolutely necessary. At one time I expected to remain there until retirement. The city was a source of energy, excitement, stimulation. The country girl had found a new home.

But all that had changed in the course of one steamy evening in a trash-filled alley with thunder rumbling in from the Gulf. The alley had erupted with the sound of small arms

fire, and the only thing that had given either of us any kind of chance was someone's nervous trigger finger spasmed by the thought of ambushing two cops. Even so, when the shooting was silenced by approaching sirens, my partner lay dead, and I was so near death the paramedics never expected me to make it to the hospital. They might not have given it much effort if it hadn't been for Dixon, who had shouted at them, "Just keep that thing on my bumper! I'll get you there!"

His voice had seemed to come from the far end of a long, dark tunnel, but some part of me—that part that was refusing to let go of life even as the blood poured from my body—had wanted desperately to scream in return, "Damn right! I'm alive. I intend to stay that way!"

Maybe that was why I was going back on my promise to myself to stay as far away from police and police work as possible. I owed Dixon, owed him for being one of the few who hadn't turned their backs on me and my partner when word leaked out we were working for Internal Affairs.

I pushed the bitter memories away and turned onto Parker Avenue. I was helping Dixon because he was a decent person, even if he wasn't always too bright a cop, and because, like it or not, I couldn't spend the

rest of my life doing a one-person version of isolationism.

Nothing had changed in the Harbor District in the last two years. Surprise, surprise. Urban renewal would be a waste of time and money. Some dynamite and an army of bulldozers would be the best bet. But even they would only send the denizens of the area scurrying elsewhere to create another Harbor District under a different name. Talk about your black humor. I had a mental image of destruction crews following hookers and pimps and dealers around the city aboard giant tanks, waving fistfuls of dynamite, with new buildings springing up in their wake.

I parked and locked the Camaro. Even on the inland edge of the District, the scent of the Gulf mingled with the odors of diesel and garbage and errant lives. I checked my watch and headed for the Harbor Bar. In the heat of the afternoon, most of the hookers retreated to the shade, in this case various bars dotting the waterfront area, looking to pick up a stray seaman or a dock worker playing hookey. At night the street corners would be a fashion parade to make Blackwell shudder.

I was looking for one particular hooker. A tall, slender black woman who called herself Cherry Cola. Believe me when I say you don't want to know

why. It took a couple of minutes to spot her, through dim light and last night's cigarette haze, sitting alone at the far end of the bar.

"Taking a break, Cherry?" I perched on the stool next to her. Cherry usually sat close to the door, "so they can see the fine stuff right off."

"Thinking about takin' the rest of the damn day. Maybe go to the beach. Drive out in my Bee Em Double U."

The bartender snickered and let the water out of his counter sink. It left under loud protest.

"Sold the Jag, huh?"

She really looked at me then, through the forest of false eyelashes. "Why, if it ain't the Sheriff, as I live and breathe. Where you been hidin', girl?"

Having Dillon as a last name had earned me more nicknames than I cared to remember. Sheriff was one of the benign ones.

"Around," I answered.

The bartender sighed, his big belly getting to me about two minutes before the rest of him. "I guess you'll be wanting something like white wine."

"Watch your mouth, Joe," Cherry snapped. "You're talkin' to a stand-up cop. Ain't too many of them around."

"Ex-cop, Cherry. I'll have a beer. Whatever's cold. And bring one for Cherry."

He snorted and turned away.

"I heard about what hap-

pened, sugar." Cherry lowered her voice in reference to the shooting. "Bad business. Heard they never caught the guys."

Officially, it was still an open case. Unofficially . . .

"Nope."

Joe set two bottles in front of us.

Cherry frowned at him. "What happened to all them glasses you just washed?"

"The bottle is fine," I said.

"Girl, you don't know where that bottle's been."

"Like a lot of things around here," the bartender muttered before retreating under her barrage of obscenities.

Cherry made a big show of wiping the mouth of the bottle. "Word on the street was all your cop buddies suddenly had a bad case of the we're-busy-call-later's."

"Crime is on the rise."

"Everywhere," she said wisely, downing another swig of the tepid beer. "Hear you're living up in Sunset Beach now, running a restaurant."

The street system of communication could put AT&T to shame. She probably knew how many people came into the place on a good night.

"You ever want to get out of the business, I'll give you a job."

"I'll keep that in mind."

She knew I was serious, and we both knew she'd already been in the business too long.

"So, girl, what brings you back to the armpit of the city?"

"Emerald."

"Ain't you give up on that skinny little white thing yet? Some people don't want to be saved."

"Is she still tricking for Big Ed?"

"That sleazoid done found himself on the wrong side of the wrong person. Fished his body out of the water two, three months ago."

A lot of people on the street called Emerald's pimp Big *Bad* Ed. Definitely meaner than a junkyard dog if crossed. "Must have been some kind of heavy-weight wrong person."

"Ain't nobody down here talking much about it." She swigged and shrugged. "Probably drugs. The whole world's goin' to hell on a cocaine highway."

"Does Emerald have a new pimp?"

"She's been freelancin'. Don't see much of her." Cherry studied her beer a little too intently.

The bartender wandered over and pointed a stubby index finger at my untouched beer. "You gonna drink that or just admire it?"

"I'm letting it breathe, and you're polluting the air."

He held up both fat hands in surrender and backed away. When he reached the other end of the bar and started wiping

the counter, I returned my attention to Cherry in time to see the last of a grin.

"You ain't lost your touch, Sheriff," she said. "Still know how to nail 'em with a look. Never knew gray eyes could be so mean."

"Cherry, I need to find Emerald. It's important."

The long red fingernails of her right hand gently scratched up and down the amber bottle. I'd seen her use the ploy on potential johns. It was designed to be just sensuous enough to keep their interest while she sized up their wallets and their temperaments. It was one of the reasons she had survived as long as she had with as few injuries as she'd had. Now she was stalling for a different reason.

"I haven't seen much of her lately." She read my look. "I'm a busy woman. Got a business to maintain, problems of my own. I ain't got time to listen to no skinny white girl whine about her problems."

"What kind of problems does she have?"

She hesitated just long enough to give the impression that she had decided, against her better judgment, to tell the truth. "She had some trouble with a cop. One of your old buddies. He thought he could get a freebie. She thought she was grabbing his wallet. When she realized

she'd grabbed his I.D. and shield, she freaked. Been hiding ever since. I ain't seen her since Sunday."

It was an old trick. Tell just enough of the truth to make it all sound like the truth. Something was definitely up, something big. Dixon's losing his gold shield should have been a source of great amusement. Cherry should have been laughing, making bad jokes, finagling a way to arrange the return of the I.D. in exchange for a finder's fee. Instead, she was lying and not doing a very good job of it.

I made sure the bartender was still out of earshot. "Look, Dixon wants his shield and his I.D. back. That's all. No questions, no recriminations."

"That's what the cops say."

"You know me better than that, Cherry," I snapped. Then, remembering what life was like for her, I reined in the anger. "You're forgetting I'm not a cop any more. I'm down here doing a favor for a friend. If Emerald won't deal with me directly, that's fine. All I want is that shield." I paused, thinking about a skinny sixteen-year-old with two black eyes and the defense mechanisms of a seasoned warrior. "If Emerald is in trouble, maybe I can help. Maybe Dixon can help."

She snorted. "He's the one got her into this."

"By asking her questions?"

"What do you know about that?"

"What do you know?" I countered.

"All I know is, that's one scared little girl. She's been skittish ever since Big Ed got killed, but now she's just plain terrified. Won't say nothin' to nobody."

"Where is she, Cherry?"

"If she's that scared, I don't want no part of it. Life's no picnic even on a good day without going around invitin' trouble."

"Where is she, Cherry?"

"I done told that cop friend of yours I didn't know where she was."

"You don't owe Dixon. You do owe me. Where's Emerald?"

"I guess it was that stubbornness that kept you alive when ever'body else done give up on you." She sighed. "She's been staying with a friend of mine over on Nieland. Wilkins Arms, Apartment 3C. But she may be gone by now. She was as nervous as a junkie without a dime to his name and talkin' about gettin' out of town."

I pushed my untouched beer toward her. "Thanks, Cherry." I pulled one of the restaurant's business cards from my purse. "Any time you want a job." I put money for the beers on the counter. Exact change. No tip.

"I already got a job," Cherry

said. Then, as I reached the door, she called, "But when I get the Jag out of the shop, we'll do lunch." Her breezy laughter followed me into the Florida heat.

Geographically, the Wilkins Arms was two blocks from the Harbor District proper. Attitude-wise, it was a lot closer. Wearing that same air of fatalism, the building looked as though it had resigned itself to a life of steady decline. If the two women sprawled on the shaded stoop were any indication, the residents were willing to bear silent witness to its demise.

I stepped over the younger one's outstretched legs and entered the dim foyer. As I climbed the stairs, cooking smells assaulted my nose, a raucous ethnic mixture strongly flavored with the odor of cooked cabbage. On the second floor landing a Latin youngster stared at me with huge brown eyes and then pedaled off down the hallway on her battered tricycle. I continued to the third floor, glad that I at least didn't have to pick my way over garbage and rats.

Rock music almost covered the sound of voices behind 3A. A board creaked underfoot, and by the time I was even with 3B, an eye peered at me from the

tiny crack between the door and the frame. I smiled. The eye disappeared like a frightened bird, and the door closed. I stopped in front of 3C, noting three more apartments beyond, and knocked.

"Who is it?" a scratchy voice cried out almost immediately.

"My name is Cass Dillon," I shouted. "Cherry Cola sent me."

In a moment the door opened the width of the safety chain, and a gnome of a woman studied me with a suspicious frown. "How do you know Cherry?"

"I've arrested her more times than either she or I would care to remember."

The frown relaxed a centimeter. "You the one she calls the Marshal?"

It was a test. "Sheriff. I never could convince her that Matt Dillon was a marshal, not a sheriff."

The frown disappeared, as did the gnome while the door was freed of its restraint. "Can't be too careful," she said, swinging the door wide to admit me.

"No, ma'am."

The apartment didn't belong somewhere like the Wilkins Arms. The walls looked freshly painted, and the rug underfoot was Oriental. The real thing, unless I was badly mistaken. Furniture filled the room, the far end of which was a kitchen, but everything was so neat and tidy, you didn't notice. I spotted

two obvious antiques, a walnut breakfront china cabinet and an old fashioned pie safe, before I realized that most, if not all, of the furnishings were antiques. Genuine, well-cared-for antiques. A small fortune's worth.

Then I realized that the gnome of a woman who could have been somebody's grandmother in her blue floral print dress was the infamous Lady Jane Gray. A madam with a reputation for taking good care of her girls as well as her often influential clients. A woman who they said could be as intimidating as any six foot, two hundred pound pimp. I had never met her while I was on the force. She had already retired—at age seventy—and Cherry had already been on her own on the streets for a couple of years.

"Please, sit down."

"Thank you, Miss Gray." I settled onto a Queen Anne chair.

She smiled, her face a becoming maze of wrinkles. "Cherry said you were a smart one. Said it wouldn't take you long to figure out who I was." She sat in another Queen Anne chair, her feet barely brushing the floor.

"I guess she also told you why I'm here."

Lady Jane nodded. "Emerald." She shook her snow-white head morosely. "The business just isn't what it used to be."

I had to agree, reluctantly. As bad as prostitution was, at least with people like Lady Jane young girls had been protected, had even had a shot at something better. Today's pimps were into profit and the power trip that comes with degrading another human being.

"Is Emerald here?" I gestured toward the open doorway of the bedroom, where a fan pulled in cool air generated by the soft hum of an air conditioner.

"Left about an hour ago. Said she couldn't stand being cooped up a minute more. I told her being cooped up in here was a lot more pleasant than being cooped up in a coffin."

"Did she tell you what kind of trouble she's in? Who she's so afraid of?"

"She told me about taking that cop's shield, even showed it to me. But that's not what has her so scared. Whatever it is, she wouldn't tell me."

"You have any ideas?"

Her laughter was surprisingly youthful, and I could imagine the younger Lady Jane charming a roomful of men with a laugh, a touch of the hand. "Old habits die hard, don't they?" Her dark eyes sparkled. "I stayed in my old stomping ground even though I have more than enough money to move into one of those fancy condominiums on the beach. You still think and ask ques-

tions like a cop." Sadness touched her warm smile. "Some things can never be taken away from us." Before I could respond, she continued. "If I were guessing, I'd say it had something to do with her pimp's murder."

"Big Ed?"

Lady Jane nodded twice. "The street's been quiet about that one. Too quiet. At first I thought it was because somebody new was moving in, somebody with the kind of weight nobody wanted to cross."

"What changed your mind?"

"If you're going to move in on somebody's territory, you do it quick while the memory is fresh. That didn't happen."

"What about Ed's girls?"

"Scattered. A few are still independent, but most of them started working for someone else."

"But no one pimp profited more than the others?"

She shook her head. "Johnny the Razor picked up three, but that was the biggest group."

None of this cleared the mystery. Even if she had witnessed the murder, which is what Lady Jane was implying, Emerald wouldn't necessarily be in danger. Not in the Harbor District where nobody ever saw anything even if it happened under their noses and where identities and names were changed with regularity. Unless—

I looked up to see Lady Jane smiling at me, her eyes twinkling. She was right. Old habits did die hard. Big Ed's killer was the police department's problem. Mine was finding Emerald and getting Dixon's shield.

"Do you think Emerald will be back?"

"She had the look of a scared rabbit. And she was carrying that big purse of hers."

The oversized denim purse was as much a part of Emerald's signature as her green miniskirts. She carried her most prized possessions in it, always ready for what she called "the possibility of a lifetime."

I stood. "Thank you, Lady Jane."

"Only wish I could have held on to her longer." She followed me to the door. "You might try the bus station."

"Did she have any money?"

"Said she did, but I'm not sure how much." She saw my glance around the room. "Nothing's missing, and if it were, she'd be welcome to it."

I paused in the open doorway. "Cherry didn't tell me how Big Ed was killed."

Lady Jane's hesitation was brief. "He'd been stabbed in the gut and then had his throat slit."

Her dark eyes met mine evenly. We were thinking the same thing. Among Emerald's possessions in the oversized

purse was a wicked looking switchblade, a switchblade that Big Ed had once taken away from her and used to cut her.

The bus pulled out with the usual diesel roar and black belch. Fumes stagnated the air. I had watched four buses depart in the last half hour. According to the schedule board, the next one left in twenty minutes. Destinations meant nothing. A scared, nineteen-year-old hooker with limited funds didn't care where she was going as long as she was going.

Twenty minutes was enough time to search the terminal. Emerald would probably hide out somewhere original, like a restroom. I pushed into the coolness of the terminal. That is, if she hadn't already left and if she was even going by bus instead of by thumb. But she was here. I could almost feel her, or maybe it was her fear I felt.

Vinnie called it my "seventh sense." All good cops had a sixth sense, he said, gut reactions, hunches, intuitions. "But you, Dillon girl, have a seventh sense that goes beyond hunches. It's downright spooky, but you ought to listen to it more." Then he had grinned and said, "You wouldn't happen to know how the Dolphins are gonna do this weekend, would you?"

Vinnie, with his handsome smiling face and his good cop's sixth sense. We had made one hell of a team. Maybe if I'd paid closer attention to that seventh sense that day—

I sidestepped a maintenance person with a push broom. Stop it, Cassandra Dillon. We've been over this territory so many times there are ruts in the landscape. Vinnie's dead. Emerald isn't. Not yet, anyway.

The city was determined the three-year-old terminal was not going to end up like its seedy predecessor. Janitorial personnel were highly visible, as were signs regarding smoking and littering and loitering. A security guard gently hustled a drunk out a side door. I gave the coffee shop a quick scan. I checked between the rows of rental lockers and let my eyes sweep the lounge areas on my way to the women's restroom.

A female attendant left, a spray bottle in one hand, a sponge in the other. The blonde preening in the mirror stiffened.

"Hello, Emerald." I stood with my back to the door. "How long have you been a blonde?"

She shrugged and went back to combing her hair. "A while." She slid the comb into the huge denim purse.

"Funny. Dixon didn't say anything about the hair color change."

She smoothed the tattered jeans and knotted the large Bon Jovi T-shirt over one hip. "Who?"

"No games, Emerald. I don't have the time or the patience. Give me Dixon's shield, and I can go back to my restaurant and you can go wherever you're going."

"I heard you owned a restaurant now. Doing real good, too." She got a grip on the purse, wrapping the long shoulder strap around her hand twice. "I like your hair long, down on your shoulders like that. Real becoming. Ever think about going a couple of shades lighter?"

"I like it dark brown. Dixon's shield."

She rolled her eyes and took a couple of steps toward me. "You still got that cop's one-track mind, dontcha?" And she swung the purse.

I was ready and ducked. The weight and momentum of the swinging purse gave me the extra seconds I needed. Before she could recover, I grabbed her arm and twisted it up behind her back.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Emerald?" I disentangled the purse from her grip. "Swing for the legs."

"You're hurting me," she protested.

"Quit being such a crybaby." I pushed her against the wall and worked to change my one-

handed grip on the purse so I could turn it upside down. "I want Dixon's shield."

"Hey, Dillon! That's my stuff!" she cried when the contents began to spill on the floor. "You can't do that! I know my rights."

"You're forgetting I'm not a cop any more. Your rights don't mean spit to me." I shook the purse again. The switchblade clattered to the floor next to the clothes, the cosmetics, the shoes, who knew what else. Still keeping a firm grip on her arm, I used my foot to push through the junk. "Where's the shield, Emerald?"

"What shield?"

"Cut the crap!"

"I don't have it!" she shouted back.

"Where is it?"

"I sold it."

"You what?"

"I needed the money."

Then she started to cry.

I chose the park because it was quiet and public. The inability to escape one's past and its habits was being thrown up in my face at every turn today. The bench where we sat commanded a shaded view of the Gulf, while at the same time making it easy for me to keep an eye on the rest of the park.

The fact that Emerald was too scared to care if I knew it or to care if I saw her cry was

enough to make me nervous. From our first meeting, she'd been a tough cookie, daring anyone to take his best shot, openly defiant of attempts to help her change her life. The walls she had thrown up to protect the little girl inside were virtually impenetrable.

She finished the hamburger and washed it down with icy Mountain Dew. "Thanks, Dillon."

Our two-person parade through the bus terminal had turned a few heads, but only because it was a break from the monotony. Once her sobs subsided, I had pulled into a gas station and stood guard while she got rid of the streaked makeup. When she emerged from the restroom, you could have mistaken her for any college freshman. Until you looked into her hard green eyes.

"What happened with Dixon?" I asked, gathering our trash and stuffing it in a paper sack.

"He wanted a freebie. I thought I was getting his wallet." She wasn't meeting my eyes. "Damn cops arrest you a few times and they think they own you."

"Okay, that's the story you and/or Cherry concocted. Now, what really happened?" I asked it gently.

She almost smiled. "You still don't give an inch." She sighed and gazed out at the Gulf, the

breeze toying with her platinum hair. "He caught me at the hotel." She knew I would know which one she meant. "The john had just left, and I was on my way out. I'd already told him half a dozen times I didn't want to talk to him."

"Dixon can be a nuisance when he wants to be." Any chance I had of getting information out of her was dependent upon my ability to keep our conversation just that—a conversation.

"He's a nuisance all right. I figured it was a setup, so I made him empty his pockets on the bed and then I made him take off his jacket and shirt."

"Why did you think he was wired?"

"Cops do that. They get you down on tape and then they close in for the kill."

"What could you know that's worth a wire?"

She chewed on her thumb and scuffed at the sandy dirt. "I know who killed Big Ed." Her voice was quiet.

"So why didn't you just tell him?"

"You know better than that. How long do you think I'd last on the street if people thought I was a squeal? Besides, he already knew. He just wanted me to testify."

"Is that why you ran?"

"I thought I was grabbing his wallet. Honest to God. I got no

use for a cop's shield or the trouble it brings."

"You found a way to make a profit from it," I pointed out.

"Yeah, well, I told you. I needed the money."

I thought about the bus ticket in my pocket. "To go to Atlanta."

"To go anywhere. To get out of here, man." Some of the old defiance was creeping back. "I can't make a living with the cops on my case."

"Testify. Get this murderer off the streets." Mentally I added, *And in jail with his own kind.*

"Nobody's gonna take the word of a hooker. He'd never see a day in jail, and where would I be? How long before they fished me out of the Gulf?" She flung her arm toward the broad blue expanse.

A little alarm was starting to go off in a recess of my brain.

"Dixon knows better than to build a case on the testimony of a hooker. I'm sure your testimony is just part of the package."

"Then why is he so determined that I testify? Tell me that."

"An eyewitness account is the last nail in the coffin."

"Only it's my coffin," she muttered, brushing angrily at a stray tear.

The alarm was growing louder. "Why all the paranoia?

Seems to me the police are the least of your worries."

She didn't answer, just swiped at another tear and chewed her lower lip.

There was a five-alarm fire in my head now. "Who killed Big Ed? Who's got you afraid of your own shadow?"

She looked away from me, toward the park. The breeze bore the scent of salt and a snatch of laughter.

"Cynthia." I used her real name gently. "Who killed Big Ed?"

She took a deep breath, expelled it, and then looked at me. Her platinum hair struggled in the wind. I knew before she uttered the words that it was trouble.

"A cop." I could barely hear her. "A cop killed Big Ed."

"Dammit, Dixon! You should have told me!"

I had run the bookkeeper out of the restaurant's small office in order to yell at Dixon in private. The dining room was empty except for a four-top of businessmen in earnest discussion and the servers working to transform the room into an Italian cafe. Emerald was ensconced in the kitchen under Tad's watchful eyes, a huge piece of Mert's pecan pie in front of her. Calorie City.

I hadn't wanted her to see Dixon arrive. She was convinced she was in a no-win situation. Maybe Dixon was drawing her into the open with the promise of protection so the only witness to Big Ed's murder could become another Harbor District statistic. If he was on the level, her testimony could still get her killed, because like it or not, she had a valid point. Who was going to take the word of a hooker over that of a cop? And just what were Dixon's intentions?

He opened his mouth, and I flung a finger in his face. "And don't give me that crap about police business."

"What would you have done differently if I'd told you?"

"I would have watched my tail, for one thing. What if someone followed you here and then followed me? Emerald's butt wouldn't have been the only one in a sling. I wasn't even carrying a gun."

"Nobody followed me. And even if they did, big deal. I was just visiting an old friend, making arrangements for a special family outing. I swear, Cass, if I had thought there was any danger I would have told you."

He seemed sincere. Hell, Dixon had always been a lousy liar, a real washout at good-cop-bad-cop. I expelled a lungful of air and a mountain of tension with it.

"Does he know he's under suspicion?"

"Who?"

"The cop who killed Big Ed."

"It's been almost three months. He probably thinks he's free and clear." Dixon ran his fingers through his thick sandy hair. "He's been walking a straight line since then. Don't know how long that'll last."

I sat in the chair behind the desk. "Who is it?" I didn't really want to know. The department's garbage was its problem. But if I was going to be looking over my shoulder, I wanted to know whom to look for.

"Tierzog."

"So ol' Sammy finally screwed up and did something stupid. Why am I not surprised? You working through Internal Affairs?"

"After what happened to you and Vinnie?" A definitive headshake punctuated the sentence. "Until I've got a solid case to take to the D.A., it's just me and the captain in on this one."

I wondered about the logistics of that and then promptly dismissed it. I had other things to worry about. Namely a scared hooker in my kitchen.

"Emerald doesn't have your shield. She sold it for bus fare to Atlanta."

"She what?" Dixon jumped out of his chair.

"Don't go having a heart at-

tack yet. I'm pretty sure I can get it back."

He dropped into the chair. "Pretty sure," he moaned and wiped his face with his hand. "Who'd she sell it to?"

"You don't want to know."

"My career is going down the toilet," he groaned. "What about Emerald?"

"For now, she's my problem. Once I get your shield back . . ." I shrugged. "I may put her on a bus myself."

"Come on, Cass. Without her I got no case."

"If she's all you have, then even *with* her you don't have a case and you know it." I forestalled any further protests. "Get out of here. Bring your family back for Little Italy Night. Seven thirty's a good time. Great food. Great company. Might be something special served with your dessert."

"And maybe the Tooth Fairy will pay for my kids' college education," he mumbled.

I don't know which bothered me more—watching over my shoulder for a dirty cop looking to cover his ass or trying to get Dixon's shield from Johnny the Razor, who hadn't gotten his nickname from a box of Cracker Jacks.

It would have been nice to be able to say that the quirks of the judicial system had disillusioned Tierzog, had so shat-

tered his idealism that he had fallen into taking bribes and looking the other way at choreographed moments. But the truth was, Sammy Tierzog had been a rotten apple from Day One.

Every once in a while, one slips through the cracks of all the testing and evaluation. Tierzog had slithered his way onto the force and up the ladder to sergeant, where he would stay until he stopped a bullet, retired, or got caught. He was cagy enough to keep himself miles away from any life-threatening situations and smart enough to elude Internal Affairs for all these years. One scared hooker would be little more than a pebble in the road. The thought of his drawing a pension made me sick. I hoped Dixon could nail him.

Johnny Carmenetti's sadistic fondness for a straight razor made him one of the most feared pimps on the street. If you were one of his hookers, you didn't hold out on him unless you enjoyed collecting scars. He had been in and out of jail so many times since the age of twelve that they might as well have kept a designated cell for him. He and I had clashed twice—once when Emerald first hit the streets and then again when one of his hookers, out of desperation and terror, had come to me for help. Ironically, that

same terror had driven her back to Johnny, and a week later her body had turned up in an alley. No new slashes. Just recent needle tracks.

As I crossed the park toward the meeting site, I decided that Dixon might indeed have better luck getting the Tooth Fairy to cough up college tuition than I would have getting his shield back from Johnny the Razor. To say there was no love lost between us was like saying Imelda Marcos *liked* shoes. After not being able to connect him to the hooker's death, I had spent three months making his "professional" life miserable. In fact, that harassment had started the chain of events leading to the ambush in the alley.

I spotted Johnny's strongarm help, a body builder with a shoulder-length ponytail, standing some twenty-five yards away next to a car. The muscle was for any males foolish enough to cause trouble. Johnny liked to handle feminine problems himself. Johnny and his trusty straight razor. I had often wondered if he was still carrying the same one he used to slice up his mother when he was fourteen. You know, for sentimental reasons or as a good luck charm. But I doubted Johnny even knew the word "sentimental" existed, and as far as luck went, he was probably only interested in profiting from other

people's bad luck.

"Business must be pretty good, Johnny." I gestured toward the silver BMW.

He lounged back against the shaded picnic table and looked at me from behind a pair of dark Ray-Bans. "Times have changed since you've been away, Dillon. Diversification is the name of the game now."

"Give me a break, Carmenetti. You can't even spell the word."

"M-O-N-E-Y." It came out slowly, around the edges of a grin.

It wasn't hard to see how the young girls, many of them runaways, fell under his spell. Dark complexioned with long, curly black hair, he had a ready smile, gorgeous and gleaming. Always a snappy dresser, his clothes fit his slender frame with just the right combination of snugness and drape. Today it was chinos and an open-collared shirt with the sleeves casually rolled to the elbows. But his dark eyes, when you could see them, were as glacial and glittering as any snake's.

"I hear you changed careers, Dillon."

I leaned against the tree shading the picnic table. Both Johnny and his bodyguard were well within my field of sight. "I meet a better class of people."

"Me, too, Dillon. All the way around." The grin was sly.

I just had time to wonder what he meant by that before he continued.

"So, Dillon, to what do I owe this honor?"

"I just thought we'd shoot the breeze a while."

He laughed. "Okay, okay. Can't blame a man for trying. It's not every day the cops come to me for help."

"I'm not a cop."

"But Dixon is. And from where I sit, he looks to be in a lot of trouble." He eased off the sunglasses and inspected the lenses. "Now, I seem to be in a position to do him a big favor." Johnny eyed me. "That would put him in a position to do *me* a favor."

"You're dreaming. Dixon would turn himself in before he'd do any favors for you. And if he didn't, *I'd* turn him in."

"You've been away too long, Dillon. You've forgotten the rules of the game."

"You're the one with the short memory. I never played your game, and the only rules were my rules."

"It's a whole other world now, Dillon."

"Pond scum is pond scum, whether it drives a beatup Caddy or a shiny new BMW."

His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed before the smirk was back in place. "Why should I help a cop?"

"What are you into now,

Johnny? Gambling? Porno? Drugs?"

He shrugged. "I like to think of myself as an entrepreneur."

"A true entrepreneur always donates to humanitarian causes, charities."

"Charities are for assholes."

"Well, then, you'd fit right in."

He straightened and pointed a finger at me. "You know, Dillon, that mouth of yours was always trouble. You don't have a badge to hide behind now, so I'd be watching what I said if I were you."

I took some satisfaction in knowing I could still push his buttons. "You gave Emerald fifty dollars for the shield and I.D. A hundred dollars buys them back and buys you anonymity."

"A hundred dollars? It's worth a lot more than that."

"It's a fairer offer than the one you made Emerald."

"She's a dumb little hooker. I was feeling generous."

"So am I."

He looked around the park and then shook his head. "I'm doing all the giving and getting nothing in return. That's bad for business."

"You're getting fifty dollars. I realize that probably won't cover your gas for a week, but it is a profit. If it'll make you feel any better, think of it as completing your entrepreneurial image."

He thought about it, glancing over his shoulder at his bodyguard, then looking out over the short expanse of sunny grass. He returned his attention to me. "What if I consider it a favor to you?"

"What if you drop dead?"

He grinned. "You're so predictable, Dillon. I tell you what. You tell me where to find Emerald, I'll give you what you want, and we'll call it even."

"Why do you want Emerald?"

"Hey. Don't go getting that mother hen look. You had your shot at getting her off the street. She didn't want your help. I could use another pretty young thing. All I want to do is talk to her. Just talk. I told you, Dillon. Things have changed."

The wrapping had been prettied up, but the contents of the package were as rotten as ever. What I wanted to know was why he hadn't told me to get lost. And if he wanted Emerald, why hadn't he taken her when he had the chance, when she was trading Dixon's shield for bus fare? Something sure as hell was going on.

"I don't suppose you have it with you?" I asked.

"Too much crime on the streets. It's in a safe place." He consulted his Rolex. "I have another appointment. What if I meet you back here in two hours?"

"Just you and the muscle.

Everybody in the same spots as now."

"Oooooh, Dillon. Getting paranoid in your old age."

"Humor me."

He stood and slid on his sunglasses. "Consider yourself humored."

He strolled in the direction of the BMW, and I had a sudden chill. Not only was something going on, but I was smackdab in the middle of it. Thanks a lot, Dixon.

"You didn't tell him where I was, did you?"

I started to say yes, he was waiting in the dining room, until I saw the genuine panic on Emerald's face.

"Even if he knew you were here, he knows better than to show his face, much less try to force you to go with him."

"Yeah, but..." She stopped and inspected her fingernails.

"But what?"

"Nothing."

"Is Carmenetti connected to Big Ed's death?"

"You know who killed Ed."

"That's not what I asked."

"What difference does it make?" Her chin lifted in her characteristic I-don't-give-a-damn pose.

"Dammit, Emerald!" I resisted the urge to pound my desk. Barely. "I'm trying to keep you alive. Dixon is trying

to keep you alive. But you're so busy trying to prove how tough you are that you're hindering more than helping."

"How do you figure Dixon is trying to keep me alive? He got me into this mess."

"He didn't turn you out on the streets. He didn't force you to refuse all the help you were offered. He didn't make you associate with sleazeballs like Big Ed and Johnny the Razor." I realized I was shouting and took a deep breath. "Dixon could have used official channels to find you. He didn't. He came to me, even knowing how I feel about the department, because it was the safest way to find you. Not the safest for him, but the safest for you."

Her gaze dropped to the floor. "Yeah, well, I didn't ask to witness a murder," she mumbled.

It would have been useless to point out that that was exactly what she had asked for when she chose to be a prostitute.

I spoke quietly. "You weren't too scared to go to Carmenetti to sell Dixon's shield, but now you don't want him to know where you are. He had the perfect chance to talk you into working for him, but for some reason wants to have that conversation now. Explain."

"There's nothing to explain."

"Have it your way."

I pushed up from the desk and left the office. I checked all

the tables in the dining room, spotted a soiled tablecloth, replaced it with a clean one, and redid the place settings. The blue-checked cloths gave the room a festive air which would be heightened by the arrival of the fresh flowers. I consulted my watch. It was about time for the delivery.

I moved to the bar and found that work on the candles had been interrupted. The customers loved the corny wax-dripped wine bottles with their stubby candles. I used a blue taper to drip wax on a bottle that had lost part of its coat and then replaced any dripless white candles that looked as though they wouldn't last the evening. I was working the tables closest to the bar when Emerald walked in, hands shoved in jeans pockets, chin less defiant.

"Can I do something to help?"

"There are some short bud vases in a box under this end of the bar. You could get them out, wipe them off, and fill them with water."

When the last of the candles were on the tables, I returned to the bar where Emerald was seemingly engrossed in her task. Just then Tad came in from the kitchen, a bucket of flowers in his hand. He spotted Emerald and raised an eyebrow in my direction. At my slight shrug, he set the bucket on the bar, smiled when Emerald looked

up, and then retreated to the kitchen. I set to work on the flowers, daisies, zinnias, marigolds, calendulas, lovingly tended by the residents of a home for the mentally handicapped with the assistance and guidance of a group of senior citizens.

"He's cute," Emerald said. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"He owns half of the restaurant. We've been good friends for a long time." I cut stems and stripped lower leaves.

"That's a pretty one."

I considered the red and white candy-striped zinnia in my hand. "They're my favorites."

"I like the daisies." She began filling the vases. "I went to Johnny because I knew he'd give me the best price. I didn't call ahead or anything. I just showed up at this bar where he does a lot of his business. He was real surprised to see me. Do these look okay?" She indicated the three vases she had filled with flowers, biting her lip as she waited for my answer.

"Very nice. You have a good eye for color. Each table gets a vase."

With a pleased smile on her face, she disappeared into the dining room. Tad stuck his head in from the kitchen.

"Need any help?"

"We're doing fine."

He winked and disappeared. So Emerald had caught Car-

menetti unawares. That still didn't explain why he had let her go.

Emerald returned from the dining room and resumed her work and her explanation. "I told Johnny I needed gas money so I could drive down to Naples with a friend, spend a few days. He seemed real pleased when he saw Dixon's I.D."

Yet when all things had been weighed, Johnny had considered knowing where Emerald was more important than possessing Dixon's I.D. Why? "He didn't try to talk you into working for him?" My fingers smelled like marigolds.

"He mentioned it. I said I'd think about it while I was gone." She combined variegated marigolds with daisies. "He sent me to the bar for some matches, but I still managed to overhear him tell that deltoid sleazoid of his to call The Man."

"The Man as in cop?"

"I didn't wait to find out. I had my money, so I got out of there." She used one of the bar's round serving trays to carry six filled vases into the dining room.

When she returned, I said, "Johnny was driving a BMW and wearing a Rolex."

"The watch is a fake, but he's real proud of that car. He's into a lot more than prostitution now." She fussed with a combination of daisies and calendulas.

"So he said. How long has that been going on?"

She shrugged. "A year or so. I'm not sure. I stay as far away from him as possible. He's crazy. Thinks he's indestructible now. Hasn't done a day of time in over a year. Brags about it."

"Can you finish these up? I need to make a phone call."

"Sure." A smile crossed her face, and she looked like sixteen-year-old Cynthia before she got off the bus.

In my office I dialed Dixon's home number and was glad he answered the phone.

"Dixon, this is Cass. Can you connect Johnny Carmenetti to Tierzog?"

"What does Johnny the Razor have to do with this?" he asked after a brief pause to shift gears from whatever he'd been doing to my abrupt question.

"Just answer."

"Circumstantially. Never hold up in court. He's got his tracks covered pretty good. Better than Tierzog. Why?"

"Curiosity. See you at dinner tonight." I hung up in the middle of his protests, knowing the rest of his afternoon would be plagued by questions and worst case scenarios. Served him right.

When I returned to the dining room, Emerald was basking in Tad's praise.

He turned to me, his blue eyes sparkling. "The dining room looks great, doesn't it?"

"Does this mean it hasn't looked great on other Tuesday nights?"

"I didn't say that." He looked at Emerald. "Did I say that? Don't go putting words in my mouth, Dillon. She's always putting words in my mouth. She didn't get temperamental until we put her name over the door. I knew we should have called the place The Blue Duck."

Emerald giggled. I slipped my arm through his.

"Tad loves playing to an audience," I said to Emerald. Then I asked him, "Do you think you could find some other work for Emerald? She could use the extra money."

"Around a restaurant there's always something to be done. Hey, how are you at busing tables?"

"Well, okay, I guess. It's been a while."

"It's like riding a bicycle. You never forget."

She considered her jeans and Bon Jovi T-shirt. "I don't have a uniform or anything."

"No problem. We can come up with something. You finish the flowers, and then I'll show you the ropes."

She questioned me with a look and when I nodded hurried back to the bar.

I hugged Tad's arm close to me. "Thanks."

He dropped his voice. "She's a good kid."

I kissed his cheek. "And you're a good friend."

"What are you going to be doing in the meantime?"

"Hopefully, making it so she can get on that bus to Atlanta without looking over her shoulder." He was frowning. "Don't worry. I'll be back in time for the dinner rush."

"If you aren't, I'm changing the name to The Blue Duck." He headed back toward the kitchen and then paused. "Take your gun."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he was gone.

It was Tad who had convinced me that I should be an active partner in the restaurant and that I could rebuild my life just interstate minutes from the place where it had been destroyed and never know the difference. He had also urged me to take advantage of the privilege to continue carrying a concealed weapon. His father had been a cop, and Tad knew what a police officer's firearm meant to him or her.

"And no matter what has happened or what you say, deep down you still are and always will be a cop," he had said.

One of those rare moments when the intensely serious Tad came to the surface, it had also been the last time the gun or my dedication to my previous career had been discussed. So

whatever information he'd been able to glean from Emerald during my first meeting with Johnny had been enough to make him mention the gun he knew I kept but hadn't carried for six months.

I locked the Camaro, pocketed the keys, and surveyed the area. Then I slung the strap of my shoulder purse across my chest like a bandolier and checked the length of the strap. The purse rested at hip level, and I could easily slide my hand in and curl my fingers around the butt of the Ruger 9mm. The guys on the force had made fun of me, but I had always pointed out that they were just jealous because they had to wear jackets in the hot Florida summers to conceal their weapons. One day I had come back to my desk to find two leather thongs attached to the bottom of a fabric purse so "you can tie down your holster like any self-respecting gunslinger."

Smiling in spite of myself at the memory, I crossed the street and began scouting the area surrounding the ten acre city park where I would be meeting Johnny. The heat of the day was trapped between its apex and its descent into the coolness of the night. Sweat slid down my back. I checked cars, looked down alleys, searched for familiar faces.

My captain had been the one

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to make the arrangements necessary to keep my handguns legal. But only after he'd done everything he could to try to convince me to return to the force. He understood my refusal, recognized the bureaucratic thinking behind the department's offer of disability pay, put a stranglehold on his own feelings about the situation. He'd already had his say, at several departmental levels and at various volume levels. Nothing to be gained by pressing it further.

"Dammit, Dillon, carry the gun," he had snapped, his face red. "There are plenty of creeps on the street who would still like to take a shot at you."

I approached the park cautiously and began reconnoitering its perimeter. What I hadn't told the captain, or anyone, for that matter, was that I fully intended to carry a gun, legally or not. In fact, a snubnose .38 had been in the purse next to my chair in his office that day. The desk sergeant hadn't asked to search my purse, and I hadn't offered.

The BMW was parked exactly where it had been earlier, almost as if it had never moved. The bodyguard, chinos and T-shirt straining to contain his muscles, stood next to the right front tire. I glanced at my watch. From my position I couldn't see the picnic table, but I knew

Johnny was there. I was almost ten minutes late, but I had something he wanted, and he would wait while I satisfied myself he was being true to his end of the bargain.

He was consulting his watch for the third time since I'd spotted him when I approached the picnic table from the same direction as earlier in the day. He adjusted the open collar of his shirt and stood. "You're late, Dillon."

"Actually I was early."

"You're really into this paranoia thing, aren't you?"

"I'm just picky about whom I choose to trust."

He shouted over his shoulder. "Lewis! Open up the car!" When the four doors stood agape and the trunk lid was raised to the sky, he said, "Johnny Carmetti is a man of his word." He did a slow turn, hands away from his body, and then lifted each pantleg. "And I'm not carrying a gun."

"What about Lewis?"

"Lewis! Put your gun on top of the car."

"And," I prompted.

"And step away!"

Lewis obeyed. Johnny grinned. "See? We're two professionals conducting a business transaction." He made a sweeping gesture. "In a picturesque park in sunny Florida. Yuppie heaven."

"Let's not get carried away."

Was he stalling for time, or was he just nervous? I could think of two reasons for him to be nervous. Either he was going to try to doublecross me or someone else was waiting in the wings. Maybe it was both. If he was stalling, I had already obliged him long enough. "I have a restaurant to run. Where's the shield?"

"Right here," he smiled, taking the leather bifold from his shirt pocket. "Good as new." He handed it over.

Everything was in order. The gold shield shone from one half of the leather wallet and Dixon's picture I.D. glared from the other side. I guess some law of nature makes mugshots and I.D. photos interchangeable. I slipped the leather case into my purse and handed Johnny an envelope.

"What's this?" he asked.

"One hundred dollars. As promised."

"I told you we'd call it even if you told me where I could find Emerald."

"Yeah, well, there's a small problem there."

"What do you mean?" The charming smile was replaced by a frown.

"When I caught up with Emerald, she was just about to board a bus for Atlanta. She coughed up your name in exchange for my letting her get on."

"We had a deal, Dillon." His voice timbre had dropped two threatening notches.

"Technically, I kept my end. You wanted to know where to find Emerald. I just told you. On a bus to Atlanta. The problem is that bus must make two dozen or more stops between here and Atlanta. You know how flighty Emerald is. She could be anywhere."

"Nobody welshes on a deal with Johnny Carmenetti." His hand slipped inside his pants pocket as he took a menacing step toward me.

Taking a corresponding step backward, I slid my hand easily into the purse. "I only paid five dollars for this purse at Wal-Mart, Johnny. Blowing a hole in it won't bother me one bit."

He stopped.

"Stay away from that gun, Lewis!" I shouted, keeping him in my peripheral vision while holding my eyes on Carmenetti.

Johnny raised a halting hand in the bodyguard's direction. After ten long seconds, he relaxed somewhat. "You were leaving yourself wide open there, Dillon, letting that cheap little hooker get on that bus before you checked out her story."

"Yours wasn't the first name she gave me." I shrugged. "Besides, she wouldn't have had that much of a headstart on me."

I could have caught up with her by now."

He seemed to be at a loss, caught somewhere between the desire to retaliate and protect his image and the common sense of simply walking away. Complicating matters was a third party, someone with strong motivation for finding Emerald. He turned, started away from me, then whirled. "You know, Dillon, in the old days, you would never have gotten away with this."

"It's like you said, Johnny. Times change. Of course, Sammy Tierzog might not consider that an acceptable explanation."

"What does ol' Flatfoot Sammy have to do with this?" It was too casual.

"You tell me."

A lazy grin that would have made a teenager's heart flip-flop spread over his face. "Rumor has it ol' Sammy may be about to get his hand slapped for getting caught in the cookie jar."

"What do you know about it?"

He shrugged. "I hear things. I guess you could say I have my finger on the pulse of the city."

"Or in the same cookie jar with Tierzog?" I probed.

"Most people would say that having a cop for a business partner was pretty risky. Maybe even downright stupid."

"What do you say?"

He consulted his watch. "I say that you have a restaurant to run and I have appointments to keep." He tossed the envelope containing the hundred dollars onto the picnic table. "Keep your money, Dillon."

"No favors, Johnny," I warned.

"The way I figure it, Dillon, things work out, I could end up owning *you* a favor or two." He winked and then slid on his Ray-Bans. "Be seeing you, Dillon." He paused before getting into the BMW and called across to me. "Next time you talk to Emerald tell her Johnny C. sends a big kiss."

The bodyguard closed all the doors, and in under a minute the silver car glided off down the street and around the corner, almost as if it had never existed.

"I can't believe Carmenetti gave up so easily." Dixon's skepticism showed.

"I think he decided it was in his best interest to forget about Emerald."

I knotted the scarf at one hip and adjusted the triangle over the other hip. The vibrant blues, greens, and pinks contrasted nicely with the slim black skirt, which, along with a long-sleeved white blouse, I kept in the office closet for emergencies. Little Italy Night had been well on its way to full swing by

the time I got back to the restaurant. I had just buttoned my blouse when Dixon had come barging in.

"How would he figure that?" Dixon had slipped the leather bifold into his hip pocket and his hand kept straying to it.

I pulled a mirror from a drawer, propped it up on the desktop, and began putting my hair up. "Maybe he's tired of being in business with Tierzog. He practically admitted to not trusting him." Under the circumstances, a simple ponytail was the best I could manage. "Maybe he already has everything he wants out of the partnership." I pulled eye shadow, mascara, blush, and lipstick from another drawer.

"Whatever the reason, he seems perfectly content to let the police department dissolve the partnership for him."

"Kind of risky, isn't it? I mean, Tierzog won't go down quietly."

"You said yourself that Johnny had his tracks covered. He didn't act like a man worried about his future."

"He's probably going to manage to turn a profit from this. I wonder what kind of plan he has up his sleeve," Dixon mused.

I applied lipstick and gave my face one last check before returning all the paraphernalia to the desk drawer. "I have no idea, and frankly, I don't care."

I closed the drawer deliberately.

Dixon stopped his mental meandering. "I know I said it before, but thanks, Cass. I owe you big time for this."

I came around the desk and slid my feet into one-inch black heels. "As far as I'm concerned, I owed you for one hell of an ambulance ride. Just consider us even."

He became quiet, and I knew each of us was reliving personal memories of that day. The air felt weighted.

Then Dixon whistled. "You never would have been able to chase perps dressed like that, Dillon. I didn't know you had such goodlooking legs."

"Better not let your wife hear you say that." I ushered him out of the office and paused in the bar long enough to give it a quick check. Only laughter and pleasant conversation.

"What about Emerald?" Dixon asked.

"After we close, I'm driving her up the coast to stay with a couple I know. They've had some success working with girls like her. She's promised to stick around if you need her." I shrugged. "Other than that, who knows?"

"You really think she can turn it around, start over?"

"If she wants to. I just don't know if she wants to badly enough."

"It won't be easy."

"No, it won't."

Leaving the street was never easy. Habits acquired from ugly survival lessons died hard, especially when some of the behavior on the streets was also present in the "civilized world," only in the more acceptable guises of society.

I could feel the old police cynicism slipping over me. Shaking it off, I put my arm through Dixon's, and we started toward the table where his wife and two children waited.

"You know, Cass, you're good at this," Dixon said.

"Why do I get the feeling

you're not talking about the restaurant business?"

"I know this guy who has a problem. Seems someone in his company is selling company secrets. We're not talking IBM here, of course, but it's still costing him money."

"Forget it, Dixon. The one-time-offer-only has expired."

"It's in your blood, Dillon."

"I kicked the habit. Order the fettucini, but leave room for dessert. Mert promised something spectacularly sinful tonight."

"You can run, but you can't hide."

"Watch me."

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UNSOLVED

by Raymond
Smullyan

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

"And now we come to the prize problem," said the King. "A certain Mr. Anthony attended a spy trial in which at the outset the court knew of the three defendants, A, B, C, that one of them was a knight, one a knave, and one a spy. The judge first asked A, 'Are you a spy?' A answered yes or no. Then B was asked, 'Did A tell the truth?' B answered yes or no, and the judge then pointed to one of the three defendants and said, 'You are not the spy, so you may leave the court.' The man gladly did this. The judge then asked one of the two remaining defendants whether the other one was a spy. The defendant answered yes or no, and the judge then knew who the spy was.

"Now," continued the King, "it is not yet possible for *you* to know who the spy was—there is more to come. Well, Mr. Anthony told this case to a friend who was a barrister. The friend worked on the problem awhile and said, 'I don't have enough information to solve this case. Could you at least tell me whether the judge got the same answer to all three questions?' Mr. Anthony told him. It is not given whether or not the friend was then able to solve the problem.

"Then Mr. Anthony told the same problem to a second friend who was also a barrister. The second friend wanted to know whether or not the judge got at least two *no* answers. Mr. Anthony told him. Whether or not the second friend was able to solve the problem is not given.

"What is given," continued the King, "is that either both friends solved the problem, or neither solved the problem, but we are not told which.

"And now," concluded the King, "*your* problem is, Who was the spy?"

"It is *really* possible to solve this?" cried Alice in amazement.

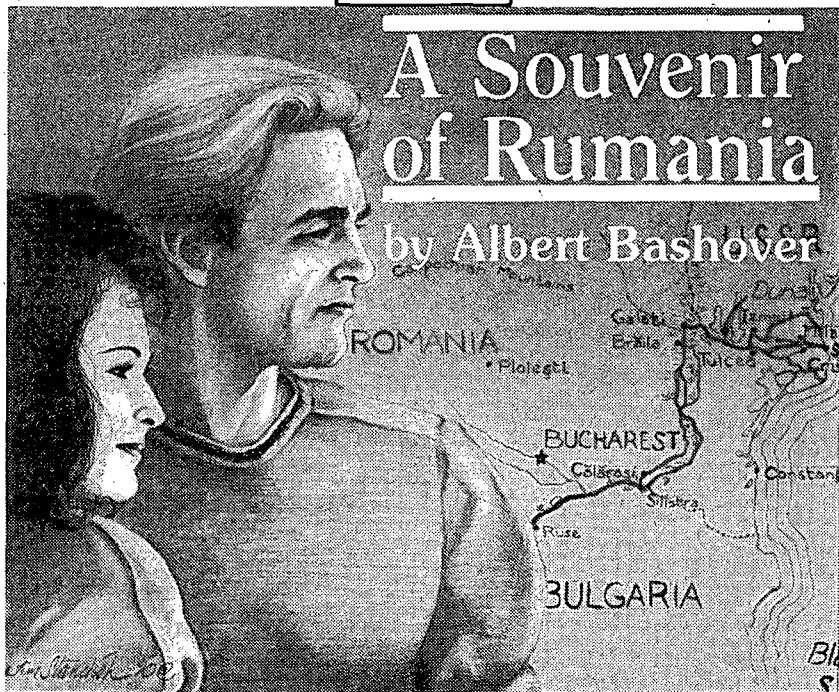
"Yes," replied the King, "I can solemnly assure you it is!"

See page 147 for the solution to the February puzzle.

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A Souvenir of Rumania

by Albert Bashover



The Calea Victoria in Bucharest is a gorgeous, ultra-wide boulevard lined on both sides with impressive, fat marble government buildings. It appears to have been designed for a grand opera stage setting, meant for choreographed parades of brass bands, brightly colored flags, and equestrian soldiers riding twenty abreast towards the Piata Victoria at its end. Unfortunately, in the Rumania of 1982, it was a dull gray expanse of nearly empty pavement,

marked only by an occasional antique truck spewing oily gas fumes, an overcrowded public transport, and a government car or two.

Maxim turned into the driveway of a small building off the Piata Victoria. He was old enough to have memories of a brighter past, and the route up the grand old boulevard to his office always made him feel a little sad. Maxim's little known department was responsible for the gathering, evaluation, and dissemination of information

dropped by tourists as they passed through Bucharest. The insignia on his little Fiat indicated that he worked for the Ministry of Tourism, but his office was separate from the ministry's. His work was done better in a less conspicuous location than the big Ministry of Tourism building on Boulevard General Magheru.

He entered the faded marble-faced building that still held a hint of pre-socialist grandeur. His small office was at the end of a corridor dimly lit with naked bulbs burning at reduced voltage. There was no information on the door, just the number 124. This was less for secrecy than because the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Tourism were constantly fighting for control of his little bailiwick. At the moment, he was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, but in this Rumania of Ceausescu, who knew where he would be next week?

Nistor, his secretary, looked up as Maxim entered.

"Marin Buganou, the manager of the Continental Hotel, called. He would like you to get in touch with him when you have a chance—no emergency."

Maxim's face betrayed an expression of displeasure. He had to deal with many unsavory characters in his job of information gathering and

evaluation, but he particularly disliked Buganou. His was a job that had to be done and he was a dependable government worker who was doing it, but Buganou seemed to enjoy the destructiveness of his work. He often questioned Maxim about the results of information that he or his hotel employees had supplied. He seemed to gloat over any particularly painful outcome. Maxim sometimes thought that Buganou was a plant by the secret police to check up on him. It would be standard operating procedure for them. The Continental Hotel was where the government housed the tourists from America, and sometimes tourist groups from Israel. This combination often produced some very interesting bits of information that should filter through Maxim's department and end up at the Ministry of Justice. Maxim didn't like it, but he knew that very often his reports found their way directly to the offices of the hated secret police. The manager of the Continental Hotel would be in a good position to shortcircuit Maxim's department and supply information directly to the police. For this reason Buganou had to be watched.

Another reason Maxim disliked Buganou was Ana Enashu.

Stephan stretched to try to relieve the stiffness of his back muscles from the long flight. The trip from the United States to Constanza on the Black Sea would have been tiring enough in any plane, but on Tarom Air, the official airline of the Rumanian government, it was a form of torture. His seat was broken so it could not assume a reclining position, the "stewardesses" had obviously received their training at the official Rumanian school of brusqueness, and the food was as bad as he remembered it. It was a strain for Stephan to remember that he was now "Steve Ender," an American schoolteacher on summer vacation, who could not understand Rumanian. There were many times when he would have liked to respond to the remarks made among the Tarom employees, but it was more important that he keep a very low profile.

"Steve" tried to look unconcerned as his luggage was loaded on the big Mercedes buses that would transport them from the airport to the "luxurious beach hotels on the Black Sea," as the brochures described them. His single large brown piece of luggage had been chosen so it would not stand out among the others in the teacher tourist group from America. It would take a very close inspection to

detect the false bottom he had constructed.

From a distance, on the road south of Constanza, the high white hotels of Jupiter City did indeed look like a piece of Miami Beach transplanted to the Black Sea. The Ceausescu regime had built a string of resort "cities" south of Constanza on the Black Sea. Each city was an exact duplicate of the other. Each had a romantic name from Roman mythology: "Neptune," "Jupiter," "Apollo." The only difference between them was that each "city" housed tourists from a different country. In that way the government was more easily able to "supervise" the movements of the visitors. Though the government was fearful of the taint to their pure Communist regime by outside influences, they needed the tourist dollar, mark, or lira. The Rumanian "lei" and "bani" were worthless outside the country. Tourists, and their currency, had to be lured into the country. It was only after a tourist had been there for a time that he discovered the elevators did not work, the food was poor, the beach was stony, and boats for fishing (or escaping) were unattainable.

Even though Stephan knew all this, he had to go through the process of being a tourist. He would have preferred to go directly to Bucharest, but that

might have aroused suspicion. It was necessary to spend the week in Jupiter with the American teachers and retirees. Then, the brochure promised them, they would have a "restful drive through the country to the beautiful capital of Bucharest."

Stephan was not interested in the beautiful city of Bucharest. He was only interested in seeing Ana Enashu.

The lobby of the Continental Hotel was as dimly lit as the rest of the buildings in the city. The shortage of electricity was just another shortage the government was struggling with. Maxim did not go directly to Buganou's office. He went instead to the Comturist shop off the lobby, where the tourists were asked to buy souvenirs with their own country's currency at the official rate of exchange. Even in the dim light from the bulbs operating at reduced wattage, the shop appeared almost colorful with dolls, glassware, and woodcarvings, but the brightest thing in the shop in Maxim's eyes was Ana Enashu.

She might have been simply pretty were it not for her glittering green eyes and her jet black hair. Maxim was in his late fifties. When his wife died so many years ago, he had been sure that the capacity to feel

the way he did about Ana died with her. He was amazed that this woman, this girl twenty-five years his junior, could awaken the feelings in him that she did.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Unger." She flashed a blinding smile at him. Though her address was formal, the proper one for a place of business, her tone told Maxim of her affection for him. It was affection, Maxim knew, nothing deeper. Ana was not the kind of woman who could disguise her feelings. Maxim was her friend, her big brother, her protector. When she first came to work as salesgirl for Comturist from her little town near the Black Sea, it was Maxim who found her a decent lodging in the overcrowded city. It was Maxim who, with his connections in government, was able to get an occasional pound of beef without standing in the long lines in front of the butcher shops. And most important, it was Maxim and his position in the Ministry of Tourism that kept her boss Buganou from coming on to her as he did with anything that wore a dress and was under his jurisdiction.

Maxim was surprised at himself. He was not a naive youth. In his job especially, he knew that nothing came free and that debts had to be paid, yet with Ana he felt he could give and give without expecting repay-

ment—except perhaps an occasional view of that flashing smile and those amazing green eyes.

“Hello, Ana. Has Mr. Bugarou been keeping his proper distance lately?”

“As long as you are around he is no problem. He’s in his office. I think he is expecting you.”

Bugarou’s office was bigger than Maxim’s. It was set up to impress. Bugarou’s smallness made the large desk he sat behind look even larger. In deference to Maxim’s position, he rose when Maxim entered.

“Good afternoon, sir. I’m so happy you could find the time to see me.”

Bugarou was an expert at groveling.

“I don’t have much time, Bugarou. What is it you wanted to tell me?”

“Oh, I won’t keep you long, Mr. Unger. It’s just a matter of giving you some information that I think you should know about, that perhaps has not yet come to your attention.

“You see, I could not help noticing that you have, shall I say, been showing some, ah, interest in one of my girls—one of my workers, Ana Enashu.”

Bugarou paused and looked out of the corner of his eye for some reaction.

“Yes, yes. Out with it, Bugarou.”

“Well, as you know, we make a check on all our workers when they come to us, and I have learned that Ana Enashu, though she is living alone and claims to be single, is a married woman. I thought you should know.”

It was difficult for Bugarou to suppress a gloating smile.

“Is that it? Is *that* what you called me down here to tell me? I have better things to do with my time. For your information, I have always known that Ana—Miss—Mrs. Enashu was married. Since our relationship has always been one of friendship only, it has never made a difference. Goodbye, Mr. Bugarou.”

Maxim tried not to slam the door behind him. His anger was beginning to redden his face. He was angry at Bugarou for thinking that his motives might require Ana to be single. He was angry at Ana for not letting him know she was married, that he had to learn of it from Bugarou.

Maxim forced himself to calm down before he entered the Comturist store across the hall. The store was empty except for Ana, who was dusting some glassware.

“Ana, could I see you this evening?”

“Of course, Maxim—Mr. Unger. I will make dinner for you after work. Is everything all

right? You look—disturbed.”

“I can’t talk right now. I’ll see you this evening.”

That evening, the flowers that Maxim always brought did not seem to brighten Ana’s little kitchen as they usually did. Ana moved silently around the room, serving dinner, waiting for the pensive Maxim to unburden his mind.

“Ana, why did you never tell me that you are married?”

Maxim was sorry as soon as he said it. It had come out explosively, as an accusation, and he knew he had no right to accuse.

Ana’s face first showed shocked fear; then it relaxed to sadness and resignation. She sat down at the table.

“Maxim, you have been a good friend. I want you always to be. But we will never be more. I thought you knew that.” She paused. “Stephan and I were married when we both were quite young. He was an engineering student. Before we were married, he had become involved with an anti-Ceausescu group at the university. He left the group when we married so that our lives could be more secure.

“One night we were told that the security police had arrested many members of his old group, and that they had confiscated lists of old members that in-

cluded his name. We put together all the *lei* and *bani* we owned and all we could borrow, and we blackmarketed it into foreign currency. It was just enough to smuggle Stephan out of Rumania.

“We are still married, Maxim. Not just by the civil authorities, but forever, by the church. We both wanted it that way.

“I would have told you in time, Maxim. Please forgive me for not telling you sooner. It should have been I who told you, not Bugarou.”

Maxim found that he could not be angry with Ana. He was beginning to realize that he saw her not so much as a woman to be wooed but as a daughter to be protected. Perhaps it was because he did not have a family of his own once his wife died. Whatever the reason, he found that his heart had adopted Ana, and his dislike for Bugarou had grown to hatred.

Stephan, along with the other tourists in the busload, followed the guide into the lobby of the Continental Hotel. He pretended to listen while the guide explained the room location procedure and points of interest to be seen in Bucharest. Stephan’s eyes were swiftly scanning everything in the lobby. The latest information he had before leaving the States was that

Ana had taken a job of some sort at this hotel. He looked at the group of Israeli tourists jabbering away in a group near the drab-colored lobby sofas, the three clerks behind the reception desk, the chambermaid and the waiter walking through the lobby to their work stations.

Ana was here somewhere.

"And you will find the souvenirs in our Comturist shop right here in the hotel lobby to be as good as you can get anywhere. They are priced in American dollars so you can pay for them without converting any of your dollars into Rumanian *lei*. You can also buy American cigarettes here."

Stephan noted that the guide did not mention that they could get many times the official conversion rate from any one of the blackmarket money hustlers in the street, or even from the waiters in the hotel. Gold, jewels, or foreign currency was the key to freedom for any Rumanian willing to take the chance of getting arrested for possessing foreign money, and almost any young Rumanian was willing.

Then he saw her. She was coming out of the Comturist store. Even in the colorless, shapeless clothes available to the locals, Ana stood out.

She did not see him till she was halfway across the lobby. A look of joyous surprise started

to form on her face. Then she saw Stephan glare at her, and turn away quickly as if to hear the guide's recitation better. Ana missed only half a step as she continued on her way to the lobby door and out to the street. She knew she would see him soon again, but this was obviously not the time or the place.

The next morning, Stephan tried to be the first tourist to visit the Comturist shop, but he was beaten by a husband and wife team of teachers from Boston who had many questions to ask Ana about the sources of the woodcarved dolls. Stephan noticed how much Ana's English had improved. It was almost as good as his own.

It seemed like years, but at last the American couple left without buying anything. There was a glass wall between the Comturist shop and the lobby. Stephan tried to make his approach to Ana look as casual as possible. They could be seen from the lobby, but not heard.

Ana spoke swiftly but softly. "Stephan, darling, you are crazy to come here. You are still a fugitive. If they catch you, you will never get out of prison."

Neither Ana nor Stephan realized that they were both speaking in Rumanian.

"Don't worry, dear. I couldn't trust this mission to anyone else."

"Listen carefully. We will not have much time to talk, and we can't afford to be seen together much. I have smuggled in five thousand dollars in American money. When I leave, I will forget my camera bag. The money is in there. My address in New York is also there. Contact Ion Dorsky in the village of Krasnit. He is the one who helped me to get out. Give me a week to get out of the country before you do so. Remember—Ion Dorsky in Krasnit."

Stephan had rehearsed this speech a hundred times. It had to be said quickly, correctly, and only once. He could not afford to be seen with Ana more than that.

"I'll see you soon," he said in English. He turned and left the shop to go to the bus that was waiting to take him on a sight-seeing tour of "beautiful Bucharest."

Maxim was one of the few people allowed to have an automobile and a telephone. Because of his job, he sometimes had to be contacted at odd hours. He felt lucky that the phone was out of order as much as it was in service. At least he was able to sleep through some nights. He was surprised when it rang as he entered his apartment after work. People usually didn't call at six o'clock.

The tone was strained and

gasping, as if the caller could not catch her breath, but Maxim recognized Ana's voice.

"Maxim, I'm sorry to bother you, but I didn't know who else to call."

"Ana, what's wrong? Where are you calling from?"

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Maxim. Please help me."

"Ana. Calm down. Tell me where you are."

The firmness of his voice must have helped.

"I'm at the hotel. In Bugarou's office. Please come!"

"What is the trouble?"

"I've killed him. I've killed Bugarou."

It took Maxim only ten minutes to reach the Continental Hotel. Maxim did not enter through the large glass front doors. A glance through the glass indicated that no one in the lobby seemed to be aware of any problem. The clerk behind the desk was sound asleep behind a copy of *Romania Libera*. Maxim went around the side of the building, through an alley that led to the parking plaza in the rear. Bugarou's office had a door to the plaza. He knocked twice, then twice more. After a moment there was the sound of a key turning, and the door opened. Maxim entered quickly, then closed and locked the door after him.

"Did anyone else try to come in?"

Ana's face was a pale ivory. "No. I waited for your knock as you told me."

Maxim looked beyond Ana, to the end of the office. On the floor alongside his desk was the body of Bugarou lying on his back. From his chest protruded the copper-colored handle of a letter opener that Maxim had often seen on Bugarou's desk. The letter opener had been commandeered by Bugarou from the Comturist shop. It was a cheap white metal casting that had been painted to look bronze. Maxim remembered seeing *A Souvenir of Rumania* stamped in gold letters on the blade. Next to the body was a camera bag, partially opened, with green currency in view.

Ana was beginning to tremble in shock. Maxim made her sit down in one of the office chairs.

"Tell me what happened."

Ana's voice started out weakly but grew in strength as she spoke.

"I saw him today. Stephan, my husband. He just walked into the Comturist shop. He had come with a group of American tourists. He was traveling with an American passport. I don't know how he did it, but he gave me a great many American dollars so I might join him in New York. We would be together again. Away from this terrible place.

"Oh, Maxim, you are a wonderful man, but to be with Stephan and to be in America! These are dreams that I thought never could come true.

"Then Bugarou called me into his office. I can't figure out how he knew, but he knew all about Stephan and our plans."

Maxim frowned. "Ana, I thought you did know. The Comturist shop is bugged. Bugarou gets much of his information from there."

"I didn't. But it's too late now. He threatened to turn Stephan over to the secret police unless I gave him the money that Stephan gave me."

"I understand, Ana."

"No, you don't, Maxim. I was willing to give him the money, even if I had to stay here the rest of my life, as long as he let Stephan go, but he wanted — wanted more! More than money. I realized there would be no end, so I—I—"

She was beginning to shudder again. Maxim put his arms around her. It was the first time he had ever done that. She fell against him and started to cry softly.

In a few moments she had cried herself out. Maxim spoke to her firmly, kindly, in a fatherly way.

"Don't worry, Ana. I'll take care of you."

"You were seen coming in here, so you will have to be seen

leaving. I will wait for a while after you leave, then I will take Buganou's body and put it in the alley. It won't be found until tomorrow. The police will probably think he was mistaken for a tourist and was done in by one of the blackmarket money changers. They have been known to get violent occasionally."

Maxim grasped the handle of the knife to remove it, but there was a snap and the porous casting cracked, leaving the blade still deep in the body.

"Damn!" hissed Maxim.

"What's the matter?" whispered a wide-eyed Ana.

"I'm afraid my idea won't work now, at least not for long. There will probably be an autopsy, and when they find that blade in the body, they will know it was not done by a chance thug in the street. They will trace the action back to this hotel. Possibly back to you." He paused, then looked at Ana sadly.

"Ana, you are going to have to leave the country immediately."

"But Stephan said—"

"Immediately. Take the money. Go home and pack a few things—not in a suitcase—in a shopping bag. Meet me in my office at seven tomorrow morning. I will finish up here."

When Ana left, Maxim turned to his work. Luckily Buganou

was small, and Maxim was strong. It was long past business hours, so the alley and the street were deserted. Maxim was able to place his burden near the street entrance of the alley without being noticed.

Tomorrow the body would be discovered and the police would be called. He and Ana would have a day, perhaps two, before an investigation would lead back to the hotel. That was all the time he had to get Ana out of the country.

Maxim had never thought of himself as privileged, but now he realized the power he had in his ability to use an automobile, to get gasoline, to travel outside Bucharest, at least to some extent, without special travel papers.

As soon as Ana appeared at his office the next morning, Maxim packed her shopping bag in the trunk of his car and left a hurriedly-invented note for his secretary, Nistor. They drove west, out of the city, toward the highway to Constanza. On the way, Ana told Maxim about Stephan's instruction to contact Ion Dorsky in the village of Krasnit. Krasnit was a tiny village on the Black Sea near the Bulgarian border. Ana and Stephan knew it because Ana had some relatives living there.

Maxim thought about this information for awhile. His orig-

inal idea had been to take Ana to a cousin he had in Constanza so she could hide until he found a way for her to leave the country, but he knew that his cousin, like himself, was a conservative old-liner who probably had no contacts in the underground world that served the illegal emigres. Making contact with Ion Dorsky was a danger. Men had been known to become informers even after years of working in the underground; still, Dorsky represented the fastest way to get Ana out of Rumania.

They drove for four hours in nervous near-silence. About fifteen miles out of Constanza, Maxim made his decision. He turned south on a badly paved two lane highway that paralleled the coastline of the Black Sea. Up until then his official license plates had gotten them past the occasional army road-checks on the main highway. The heavier traffic on the main highway had made the army personnel that manned these roadblocks perfunctory in the performance of their duties, but any soldiers on the less used byway might be more inquisitive about an official car with a young woman in it heading towards either the Bulgarian border or the coast of the Black Sea. Anyone between the ages of fifteen and thirty going in that direction was suspect.

For a while the only traffic on the road was an occasional farmer riding in his rubber-tired open wagon, pulled by a well-scrubbed but underfed horse. The farmers looked straight ahead and did not even acknowledge the passing of the dusty little Fiat.

Ana pulled from her memory the landmarks they needed to guide them to Krasnit. The village was too small to earn its own mention on road signs. "We're almost there," Ana said as Maxim rounded a curve in the road.

That was when Maxim saw the khaki-colored army truck straddling the narrow road. The thick forest trees came close to the road on both sides so that there was no chance of skirting the truck. Maxim knew it would be foolish to try it in any case. He braked to a slow stop and waited for the armed young soldier sitting on the hood of the truck to approach him.

But he didn't move. Instead, the door of the truck cab opened and an erect soldier climbed out and approached. A cold steel case enveloped Maxim's chest as he saw the sunlight sparkle off the gold colored insignia. An officer! Not just a farm boy waiting out his tour of duty, but an officer for whom the army was life. How could he explain being so far from his office in Bucharest with no travel pa-

pers, and with a young woman—
“Maxim?—Maxim Unger?
What are you doing way out
here?”

The coldness in Maxim's chest slowly melted as the features of the officer's face coalesced to fit a pattern in Maxim's memory.

“Jan Novotny! Why, I haven't seen you since—since—”

“Since your wife's funeral, Maxim. It's been a long time. I'm sorry I haven't kept in touch, but the army has kept me moving around, and, oh, hello . . .”

For the first time the officer's eyes went past Maxim to focus on Ana huddled in the passenger seat of the car.

“Jan, this is, uh, a friend of mine. She has a very sick relative in the village of Krasnit. I promised to take her there.”

Ana picked up on Maxim's cue quickly. She brushed her hair away from her beryl-green eyes and smiled wanly at the soldier. “I hope you don't mind, officer, but she is awfully ill and I must get to her soon.” She projected just the right amount of childlike helplessness and womanly allure.

The soldier gave Maxim a knowing smile. “You always had good taste, Maxim. You had better get there quickly. It will be dark soon, and we double the patrols after seven P.M. Security is pretty tight around here.”

Jan waved at the truck, and

the vehicle with the soldier still sitting on the hood backed off into one lane, leaving the other open for Maxim and Ana to pass.

Twenty minutes later Ana signaled Maxim to turn off onto a dirt road between two rows of wood and stone houses. The only thing that indicated that this was a village was the open well in the middle of the road. Even in the eighties, piped water was a rarity in many of the outlying villages.

The sky was beginning to darken, not only because of the setting sun but also because of the gathering of thick black clouds coming in from the east over the sea. In a little while a rainstorm could turn the hard-packed dirt road to a river of brown mucilaginous soup that could make it impossible for the auto to return to the highway.

A very tall woman wearing pants and heavy work boots was hurrying up the road toward a house near the highway. Ana leaned out the window of the car and called to her.

“Can you help me? I am looking for the house of Ion Dor-sky.”

The woman appraised the car with its official insignia and the older man behind the steering wheel. The young, pretty girl talking to her didn't seem to fit.

“I don't know any—”

“Please, I am Ana Enashu.

My aunt lives here. You might remember me. I have to see Ion Dorsky."

The woman made a quick decision.

"The third house past the well on the right." She hurried on without looking back.

Maxim pulled the car between two houses so it would not be too obvious from the road. He let Ana knock at the door while he waited in the car. She would arouse less fear or suspicion in anyone who answered the door. He would keep the money in the car until he felt it was safe to turn it over to Dorsky.

The door opened a crack. The dim light from inside painted a yellow line down Ana's body. For about two minutes Maxim watched as there was earnest conversation between Ana and the person behind the door. Finally the door opened just wide enough for Ana to slip in; then it closed, completing the darkness that had fallen.

Maxim took a nearly empty pack of American cigarettes from his pocket. He counted them. Four. They would have to last till the end of the week. Even for government officials they were expensive to get. He leaned back in the car seat and lit one. It was the first time in a long while that he had been able to relax his body, but his mind was still racing.

If it was he who had all those American dollars, he knew he could get out of the country and find his way to New York. But an innocent like Ana? That money would attract danger like a magnet. There were so many miles and so many pitfalls between Krasnit and New York. But what more could he do? He had already put his job—his very life—in danger to help this girl. He would have enough of a problem to get back to Bucharest without being arrested. How much of a knight in shining armor could he be?

His cigarette was finished and he was longing for another one when the door opened and let a flood of yellow light out into the now deep darkness. Two figures emerged and hurried to the car.

"Maxim, this is Ion. I have explained everything to him, and he said he could get me to Turkey and get me a passport and it would only cost one thousand American dollars."

Ana's face was flushed with excitement. She looked happy for the first time in many hours. But Maxim's heart froze. Why had the child said "only"? That was advertising that she had more money. That was asking for trouble. Maxim looked closely at Ana's companion. It was a strong face. A farmer's face, deeply weathered and dark. It had strength, but not obvious

compassion. He could possibly do what he promised, but he would have to be watched—and once she got to Turkey?

There was a split second of silence while a million thoughts raced through Maxim's mind.

"Dorsky, I will give you twelve hundred American dollars if you get two passports and passage for two to Turkey."

Dorsky thought for a second. "It's a deal. We will leave by boat tonight. You will not have time to return your auto, so that will be part of my payment. Get your things and come into the house when you are ready." He turned and walked back to the house.

Ana stared wide-eyed at Maxim. "What are you doing, Maxim?" she whispered. "You can't—"

"Quickly, Ana. We'll talk later. Take your things from the trunk. I will take out the money we need for now. The rest we will divide and hide under our clothing. Whatever you do, don't give anyone a hint that we have any more money. We may need every dollar we have left to get out of Turkey." As he talked, Maxim had loosened his belt and was lining the flat packs of greenbacks under

his shirt at his beltline. Ana watched, then put some packets of dollars through the neck of her blouse where they fell against her leather belt. She distributed them so that at a casual glance she would not look too fat.

"I should have brought some extra clothing," said Maxim with a half smile to Ana. Ana returned the half smile. A small tear was forming in her eye. A tear made up of equal parts of affection for Maxim and fear of the future.

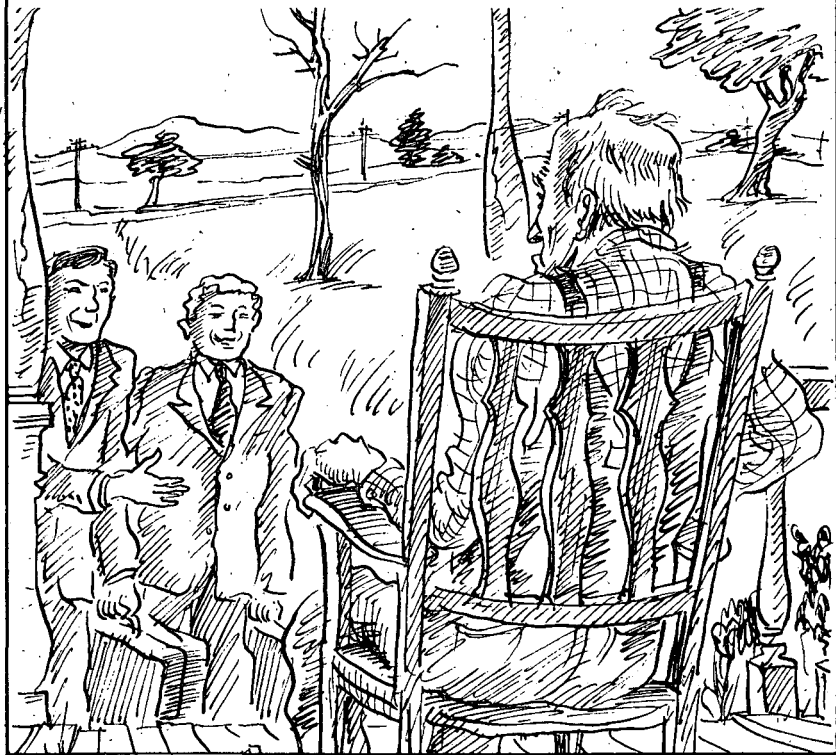
"Don't worry, Ana. We will make it to New York and your Stephan. I probably could not have made it back to Bucharest without being stopped and arrested anyway. When I think about it, there was nothing much there for me to return to."

He closed the car door and they started toward the house.

I may be a little old for this sort of adventure, thought Maxim, but change is what life is all about, and by God, I may be old, but I'm still alive! Maxim quickened his step so that Ana had to hurry to keep up with him. From a distance one might think that the tall man was the younger of the two figures going toward the house.

This Old House

by Geoffrey Hitchcock



The two villains peered through the bushes at the old house. They couldn't see much besides the rusted iron roof poking out above the overgrown shrubs in the neglected garden.

"Ideal," said Wayne.

"Just the job," agreed Eddie, "if it ain't too populated."

"It doesn't look like it is, but we'll soon find out. Now smarten yourself up—you look as if you've spent the night in the bush." Wayne straightened Eddie's tie and brushed some

clinging leaves off his clothes. "Try to look as if you've worn a suit before. And leave the talking to me."

"Get knotted," said Eddie. "What are we doing?"

"We'll play it by ear—see what turns up. Meantime we're businessmen whose car broke down."

Old Doug Prentice sat in his chair on the verandah, rocking quietly. He could have been sittin' and thinking or he could have been just sittin', he thought, which proved he was sittin' and thinking at this moment. He did a good deal of both these days. This old house, he thought, needs a coat of paint . . . and some new boards . . . and a couple of tap washers . . . and . . . and . . . he nodded off and slept for ten minutes without noticing it . . . tomorrow I'll walk down to the village and get some paint and a few things. He thought this nearly every morning, but there didn't seem to be any urgency. This old house, he would say to himself, will last me out. Later, he thought, he might totter into his beloved back garden and knock over a few weeds or gather a few of the vegetables or fruits that obligingly seeded themselves, year after year, in the fertile soil.

It had been a good garden once. He could remember when . . . never mind, there was only one to feed now. . . . His thoughts slipped easily into the past where his memory was clear, now that he often forgot what he'd gone to get. There had been four to feed then and more than enough to do it, but they were all gone now—Ellen, dear girl, and the children, neither of whom had lived long enough to draw her pension. Now there was only Cindy, who wrote to him regularly once a month and was liable to drop in from time to time from some exotic land to try to tidy the place up. Not that it was ever untidy—neat as a new pin—well, an old pin, a rusty old pin. Perhaps his granddaughter was right, he should have it redecorated. Do it all up, she said, it's a good old house, it'll give you a new lease on life, too. Yes, she was right, it was a good old house; they didn't build them like this any more, and it was still sound—just the odd plank with borer in it where the millers had palmed sapwood off on his father, and maybe a little rot here and there where the weather had seeped in. It wouldn't cost much and there was a pile of money in the bank—his needs had been so small for so long now that he never used up all his pension.

Yes, it would be a good idea; he was getting into a rut, beginning to act old when he still had all his faculties. After all, he was only eighty-seven. Next time he walked down to the village he'd have a chat with Bert. . . .

He woke up to see two men walking up the path. Young men dressed in city suits and neckties that seemed out of place here in the country and on a warm day. They walked slowly, looking from right to left, summing the place up. They arrived at the verandah and set down the two suitcases they had been carrying.

"Giddyay there," said the one who seemed to be the boss or leader. "Warm day."

"Sure is," said Doug. "You boys been walking far?"

"Not far but too far. Our car broke down, dunno why; it just won't go."

"Kevin'll fix it for you, he's good at cars."

"That's great. Where's Kevin?"

"In the garage in the village—Mac's Motors."

"May we use your phone?"

"Sorry, I don't have a phone."

"No phone?" The two exchanged glances.

"No, I had it disconnected years ago—never used it. The rates and electricity's bad

enough without paying for a phone. But it's only a step to the village—hardly more'n two miles."

"Two miles!" This from the other one.

"Tell you what, Mr. . . . ?"

"Prentice—Doug Prentice."

"Tell you what, Doug—I'm Wayne, by the way, and my mate's Eddie—tell you what, we'll just sit here in the shade for a while to cool down and then Eddie'll trot down to the village and find your Gavin—Kevin."

"Toss you for it," said Eddie.

"Ah, no, such jobs are the privilege of youth."

"Bollocks."

"You both look pretty young to me," said Doug, trying to size them up. "What do you do for a living? Agents of some sort?"

"Agents?" Wayne rose to the challenge, his fertile imagination working overtime. "Yes, that's right, we're in real estate, and we're driving around looking for a suitable property to develop into a country club. You know, a place for the very rich to relax from the strains of making money—golf course, tennis courts, swimming pool, saunas, that sort of thing. Not forgetting clubrooms, bars, bungalows, et cetera."

"No good around here. Too far from Auckland."

"Oh, I don't know, it's only a

couple of hours in a BMW, and it's central for Hamilton and Tauranga. But as I say, we're only looking around at this stage—or were until our car broke down. Now, how about offering us a nice cup of tea, and then Eddie'll go down to the village and see if he can find your Gavin."

"Kevin. I'm not selling my place."

"That's okay. We haven't got to the stage of making offers yet."

"I've got thirty acres."

"Thirty acres? That'd do fine, what's on it?"

"Nothing much. I've got this half acre fenced off for the house and my garden and the rest I used to lease out to one of the local farmers but he overgrazed it and didn't fertilize and now it's reverted to scrub mostly. There's a few acres of native bush that I always kept for the birds."

"Could be just what we want, eh, Eddie?"

"Could be," said Eddie. "I dunno about you, but I'm dying of thirst. Any chance of a beer?"

The old man stood up, got his balance, and walked into the house. "I don't have beer, I'll put the kettle on." Bloody developers, he muttered to himself. Well, they're not going to get their claws on my patch and me land up in one of those re-

tirement villages among all those old fogies.

The others watched him go. "Sure looks as if your luck's holding," said Eddie.

"I always knew I had a good guardian angel."

"Amen," Eddie mocked. But he couldn't deny it had all gone smoothly. The robbery, the cool way they had removed their balaclavas in the foyer and had walked out like two businessmen and driven off slowly in the car they had "borrowed" before anybody in the street had known what had happened. And then, master stroke, they'd driven across town and returned the car to its suburban garage where its owner would find it undamaged when he returned from his trip to Australia, never knowing it had been off the premises. From there two solid citizens, each carrying a medium-sized suitcase, had made their way to Hamilton using public transport. Here Eddie had wanted to use his wonderful selection of car keys to "borrow" another car, but Wayne said no. Look, he explained to Eddie, we're in the clear at the moment, the cops haven't the foggiest idea where to look for us. All they'll be hoping for to give them a lead is a nicked car, an abandoned car. So they'd crossed the road to a hire depot where Eddie produced one of his many

driving licenses, and they'd driven off without a worry in the world to look for a hideout.

Doug called and they went through to the kitchen where the old man had switched on an electric jug and was dropping tea bags into mugs. "Don't bother with the pot any more, it isn't worth it just for one."

"That's okay," said Wayne, "tea bags are fine."

Doug got sugar from a cupboard under the bench and a big jug of reconstituted milk from the fridge. "I haven't any cake, but there's some biscuits."

"It's okay," said Wayne.

"I'm starving," said Eddie.

"We didn't get much breakfast," Wayne explained.

"We didn't get any breakfast," Eddie put things straight.

Doug fetched a loaf of bread, a pot of margarine, and a jar of apricot jam and a knife. "Help yourselves," he said.

The two hungry villains fell to, and slice after slice of bread and jam disappeared down their gullets while the old fellow found himself telling them all about how he'd lived by himself for five years since his dog died and how he'd lost his wife five years before that and how he walked to the village, as he called the little town of Kakueka, once a month for supplies which Clive, the rural delivery man, brought home for him. That was about

the only time the R.D. called, apart from delivering the mail.

Wasn't he lonely? Not really, he had his wireless so he knew what was going on, and it was good not to have anybody bothering him. Nobody at all? Sometimes a neighbor might drop in for a cuppa and a chat, but none of his old mates were living on this planet any more. Only Cindy, his granddaughter, came and stayed for a few days every year or so. "She wants me to do the old place up, but I reckon it'll last me."

The two listened, fascinated. Their appetites seemed inexhaustible to the old man, but at last they had enough to eat, said thank you kindly (at least Wayne did), and made themselves fresh mugs of tea. Eddie tilted his chair back and folded his hands behind his head. "I like it here," he said. "I think we should stay awhile."

"Yes," said Wayne, "it would be good for our old Uncle Doug to have somebody to look after him. We could clean the place up a bit."

"No, you boys get along and look for that real estate you're after. I don't like people messing with my things. Cindy does that when she's here."

"When was she here last?"

"Around Christmas I think it was."

"That's more than two months

ago—bound to need a bit of dusting by now.”

“Yeah, I think we’d better stay,” said Eddie.

“But you can’t—you can’t just move in here like you . . .” He looked at them aghast. They already had a settled-in look. His voice faded. “Like you owned the place.”

The two sat and grinned at him. He stared from one to the other in horror. He was remembering last night’s news. “I know who you are—you’re those two bank robbers.”

“Bank robbers?” Wayne was all innocence.

“The two who robbed a bank in Auckland yesterday. It was on the news last night.”

“We didn’t hear the news last night,” said Eddie.

“I don’t suppose you did—you were on the run looking for a hideout, somewhere to stay until the heat’s off.” The two just grinned. “Well, you can’t stay here.” They made no move. “I don’t worry too much about stealing from the bank, the bank’s stealing all the time, but you shot the teller.”

“He shouldn’t have reached for the phone,” said Eddie.

“No,” said Wayne, “that was a real stupid thing to do.”

It wasn’t so much the words and their confirmation of his suspicion but the casual way they were spoken, the utter cal-

lousness and lack of any feeling of remorse that stunned Doug. He dropped into his chair and stared at them, speechless. Then anger overcame fear. “Get out,” he said.

They just grinned at him. Who, their grins implied, was going to make them? He knew he was beaten. His taut old body slumped back into his chair. “I’ll have another cup of tea,” he said. Wayne stood up and put the kettle on. “That’s better,” he said. “Sugar?”

And so they stayed. The terror of the knowledge that Wayne would slit his throat without the slightest compunction whenever it suited him gave way to anger—anger at his helplessness—and anger in its turn gave way to lassitude. He was eighty-seven, and he was too tired to worry about it. All he could do was endure them and hope they’d soon get bored and move on. If they murdered him—and they were almost bound to do that because they couldn’t go off and leave him with all the evidence—well, what did it matter? He’d done his dash and was only waiting for some night to carry him off anyway.

But he still had one hope—their car. The car they had no doubt stolen had broken down,

and they had abandoned it. An abandoned car would attract attention and the police would come. But two days passed and no police came.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" he asked Wayne.

"What's that, Pops?"

"Your car. When the police find it, they'll be around asking questions."

"Not to worry," said Eddie. "Somebody's bound to have nicked it by now. We left the keys in it."

"Actually," Wayne explained, "we didn't leave the keys in it, we left them under it. We'd already phoned Avis and told them where to find it. Said we'd been offered a lift the rest of the way. Eddie pulled off some vital wire that would be easy to see and put on again. They came for it about three hours later and drove it away. We heard them from the bush where we were dossing down for the rest of the night. No, Pops, we may be somewhat unconventional folks, but we're not stupid. Good of you to worry about us, though."

After a week or so of fear, anger, frustration, and forgetfulness, he began to enjoy their company. They were his long lost great-nephews, they told him, and after a time he almost came to believe them, though

logic told him that to have any kind of a nephew, great or small, he'd have to have had a brother or sister. He was certain he hadn't had any siblings, and he didn't think Ellen had any either, though he couldn't be quite so positive about that. But the inventive Wayne came up with a brother who was a black sheep and had been banished to Australia when the wee Doug was too small to remember, and between them the two villains invented such a collection of relatives, mostly oddballs, that poor old Doug's brain became so confused that he didn't know what to believe.

The time soon came when the old man's stock of food ran out and they didn't want to live on potatoes. They persuaded him (what choice did he have?) to write out a cash check and a note to the bank manager explaining that Mr. Wayne Morris and his cousin Eddie Jardine were relatives of Doug's who were spending some time with him and helping him with jobs about the place. Wayne went off to town, leaving Eddie to keep an eye on Uncle Doug. He cashed the not-insubstantial check without difficulty and set out to lay in a good stock of food and to spread the rumor of his relationship to the old man. He went to the hardware store and bought ten liters of Timbacyl

and a paintbrush to further establish the idea that they were helping about the place. Then he hired a taxi and drove back with his haul.

After that things were pleasanter for the two fugitives. They still kept away from town except for the occasional foray in search of food and beer. They had a splendid reason for being where they were, and the infrequent visitors were soon got rid of. Eddie would take the old man to the back bedroom and keep him quiet while Wayne explained that his uncle was having a nap. The old man is fine, he'd say, but as you know, he's very frail now and needs to sleep a lot. This always made good sense to the friend, who would chat a while about the weather and then depart.

Doug acknowledged himself to be a prisoner, but it wasn't a bad jail and he made the best of it. During the day he was always in sight of his captors. If he attempted to walk down the garden path to the gate, they simply turned him round and walked him back. At night they locked the front and back doors and kept the keys. Eddie fixed the windows so that none of them would open wide enough for him to climb out.

One thing he did enjoy was having somebody to talk to—talk at, Eddie said. On fine

days he would sit on a box in the back garden and regale his captors with tales of the past while they worked under his instructions at restoring the vegetable patch to its former glory. The work ethic wasn't part of the robbers' makeup, but they had to do something to avoid being bored to death. After a while they began to enjoy the sessions in the garden—doing something constructive instead of destructive was a new and not altogether unpleasant experience. Not that they achieved much, they spent most of the time fooling around or leaning on their spades while they listened to Doug's tales.

But they had dug over quite a sizable patch and made it ready for sowing. They were hard at it when a visitor arrived and found them all in the garden. The visitor was Bill Hewson, an old friend whose grandson had given him a lift from Hamilton and left him with Doug while he went into Kakueka where he had some business. It was a not uncommon occurrence. The two old men chatted away while the two workers fetched chairs and joined in the conversation. Doug introduced them as his great-nephews.

"Didn't know you had any relations left besides Cindy," said Bill.

"Neither did I," said Doug, "until these two pitched up out of the blue. I'd forgotten all about that branch of the family. They're doing a great job."

Bill acknowledged that that was right. Eddie went into the house and brought out tea and biscuits. "You'll be starting on the house one of these days?" asked Bill.

"Soon—soon," said Wayne.

Doug felt uncomfortable at the idea of their messing about with his house. *His* house. His oldest friend. He would do the jobs himself. One day. When they were gone. With Bert's help. He said nothing.

The grandson arrived, was introduced, said he was sorry but time was pressing, and whisked his granddad away. The two crims breathed sighs of relief. "Well done, Pops."

"What d'you mean?" Doug was puzzled. Wayne realized he'd made a mistake and for once was at a loss. Eddie, who wasn't bright enough to see where Wayne had erred, inadvertently came to the rescue.

"Yeah, you only dropped off to sleep twice," he teased.

"I did no such thing!" The two villains laughed and shook their heads as if to say, oh, yes, you did.

The old man stomped into the house in a dudgeon. He was annoyed with himself for drop-

ping off while Bill was there and annoyed with the two lads for teasing him about it. But were they teasing? Or covering up? Hadn't Wayne meant that it was well done that he hadn't given them away?

That night he lay awake and worried about it. Why hadn't he given them away? Because deep down he didn't want them to go and leave him to everlasting loneliness again? Or because he'd come to believe they were his relations who were kind to him and had forgotten who they really were? Or because of the consequences to himself and Bill if he'd spilled the beans? All three, he suspected, but he knew he'd been right not to tell Bill.

He also knew that he had had enough of their company and that the only real reason he dreaded their departure was because it would signal his own demise. They wouldn't stay much longer now—it was almost three months since the crime, and it would be well and truly buried in the "unsolved" file by now. And Eddie was getting restless, pining for the bright lights, women, and booze. He had heard him arguing with Wayne in the night. No, it wouldn't be long now. He could feel the cold steel, the burning bullet. He shivered. It was time for action, but what could he

do? One very old, lightly built man against two strong young thugs. He would need help.

He lay in his bed, half thinking and half listening to the house creaking and groaning in the rising wind. Poor old house—what would become of it when he was gone? There were so many little jobs that needed doing. His unwelcome guests could have worked wonders in the time they'd been there, but all they had done was a bit of digging over that he would have done by himself of a Saturday morning when he was their age. The house continued its groaning. Suddenly Doug sat up and listened. Was it trying to tell him something? He believed it was. Inanimate object it might be, but it had been his good friend and protector through fair and foul weather for oh so many years. He lay back on the pillow grinning to himself.

Supplies were running low, but it was cold and windy and Wayne didn't feel like walking to town. He sent Eddie into the garden to forage for a few spuds while he stayed in the kitchen thumbing through Ellen's old cookbooks to see what he could do with the bits and pieces they had. Doug fetched the old chair from his bedroom—the one with the bad borer in the right back

leg—and placed it in front of the cupboards that filled the wall above the workbench almost to the ceiling. Then he fished in a cupboard on the other side of the room under the sink bench and dug out an old cast-iron frying pan. It weighed a ton, and he wondered if he'd be able to swing it.

Wayne looked up from his book. "What are you doing, Pops?"

"There's a lot of stuff in those top cupboards—bottled stuff, peaches, beetroot, tomatoes, apples, pears—Ellen was a great bottler. And some I've done."

"It'll be pretty old by now."

"Yes, it's old all right, but it could still be good—worth having a look at."

"The doors are all stuck. I've already tried them."

"Stand on the chair and give a real good tug, they should open. They're not locked—only ball catches."

"What's to lose?" Wayne stood on the chair and gave a tentative tug on a knob. Doug stood back. That chair leg must give, and while Wayne was sprawled on the floor, he would cosh him on the head with the frypan and that would be one down.

"Give it a decent pull. Surely a strong young fellow like you can pull an old cupboard door open."

Wayne grasped the knob with

both hands and stood on his toes. His weight shifted to the faulty chair leg and—*crack!* What happened next was something the old man hadn't planned. The whole cupboard or set of cupboards, eight feet long and five feet high, loaded with two or three hundred jars of Ellen's preserves as well as a heap of surplus crockery, peeled off the wall and came crashing down on Wayne, who howled with pain.

"You all right, Wayne?"

Only Wayne's head was sticking out from the wreckage, his face contorted with agony.

"Get this bloody thing off me!" he screamed.

Doug made a half-hearted attempt to lift it but saw to his delight that the wreckage was firmly wedged between the cupboards under the workbench and those under the sink. "I can't shift it," he said. "Can't you heave it up?"

Wayne groaned. "I think I've dislocated my shoulder, and my legs are tangled up and hurt like hell."

Doug got down on his hands and knees and peered under the cupboard. He couldn't see very well, but it was clear that Wayne had fallen awkwardly and his legs were jammed up with the now totally smashed chair. He would never get out by himself.

"For God's sake, do some-

thing." Wayne was almost at the end of his endurance. "Get Eddie."

"Yes, Eddie'll get you out." Still clutching his heavy pan, Doug crawled over the cupboard. Wayne gave a final scream and passed out.

The kitchen opened into the passage. Opposite was the dining room door. Doug went into the dining room and fetched two bentwood chairs. He laid these down across the passage in the short section that led to the back porch. His plan was simple. Eddie would come running from the sunlight into the dark passage and trip over the chairs and he, Doug Prentice, eighty-seven, would crack him one over the head with the frying pan. He would enjoy that—he'd never really liked Eddie, who was lazy and uncouth. He hefted his weapon and gave a couple of practice swings. Then he went to the back door and called to Eddie who, true to form, was sitting on a box in the sun, sheltered from the wind at the bottom of the garden.

"Eddie, Eddie, come inside."

Eddie got up slowly and stretched. He tossed his cigarette aside. "Have you poured the coffee?"

"Quick, Eddie, Wayne's hurt himself, he's had an accident."

At that moment Wayne came

out of his faint and started yelling. Eddie grasped the situation and started to run. Doug stepped over the chairs and stationed himself in the kitchen doorway. This was it. If he failed, it would be tickets for him. Suddenly he knew he couldn't do it. Apart from his small strength, he just didn't have it in him to bash anyone hard enough to do damage. He stood there petrified. Eddie's foot struck the second step.

There were six wooden steps leading up to the back porch. They looked sound enough, but they were slowly rotting away underneath where the condensation hung. Eddie stamped up them two at a time. It was too much for number four. His foot went through. Number three step caught his heel. Number five broke his thigh bone. Even from the kitchen door Doug heard the bone snap before Eddie screamed.

The old man sighed, put down his frypan, and took the chairs back to the dining room. Then he hefted his weapon again and stepped out the back door—he wasn't taking any chances. Eddie had stopped screaming and was sprawled on the porch floor, his left leg still trapped between the broken halves of step four. "You've broken my step," he said. "First Wayne breaks my chair and pulls down my

cupboards and now you break my step. That's a fine way to repay my hospitality." He turned to go. Eddie's reaction was to try to leap up and clobber him. He screamed again.

"Bugger your rotten step—it's broken my bloody leg. Get me outta here!"

"I don't think I can, Eddie, you're much too heavy for poor old me. Drag yourself off the steps and make yourself comfortable while I think what to do next."

Eddie's thought was to grab the old man and make him suffer. He shot out a hand to grab him by the ankle, but the wily old fellow was expecting that and kept out of range. Eddie went white with pain and screamed again. Doug bashed his outstretched hand with the pan. "Naughty," he said. "Try that trick again, and I'll put the other hand out of action, too."

He went into the house where Wayne was groaning under the cupboards. "What the hell's happened to Eddie?"

Doug told him. "He won't be able to help you out of there, I'm afraid. Not your lucky day today, is it? But it seems to be one of mine—I'm feeling pretty good. I think I'm strong enough to walk to town. So just you hang in there. Reckon I could get help in about an hour."

"No, no—don't go—just get

me out of here. Get a jack from the shed—get a pole and lever this thing off me. I'll be all right then, no need to go for help."

"Ah, Wayne, you know I haven't got a jack and I can't manage a pole. I can't just leave you there in pain—besides, Eddie's got a broken leg and a smashed hand."

"Bugger Eddie!"

"That's not very nice, Wayne. Now, just you lie quiet and I'll have the ambulance here in no time at all."

He put on his woolly hat and his good coat, picked up his walking stick, and walked slowly down the path. After about ten steps he turned and went back to the house and patted the verandah post. "Good old house," he said. "You got the bastards. I'd never have got them by myself, but you got 'em good. Good old house." He gave it a final pat. "Look after them until I get back with the sergeant. Don't let them get loose." At the gate he turned to his house once more. He could have sworn it was grinning.

He grinned back. The ambulance, he thought, poor boys.

He wasn't a vindictive man. He quickened his pace as best he could, but it was hard going against the wind and he soon tired. He sat down on a bank at the side of the road where he often rested and napped for awhile. When he awoke, his surroundings triggered the wrong memory chords—he had forgotten all about the villains and was on his usual monthly shopping spree. He felt in his pockets—damn, he'd forgotten his checkbook and shopping list. Never mind, it wasn't the first time, and he'd always managed without them before. It was one of the things he'd noticed about getting old—he was getting very forgetful!

It was the sight of the police station that jerked his memory back into the proper groove. He went in and told his tale. "You will hurry, won't you," he said, "especially with the ambulance." But he declined the offer of a lift back. He didn't want to be there when they carted his boys away, and besides, he had to see Bert urgently—those two no-gooders weren't the only ones with broken bones.



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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Blue Room

by Prosper
Mérimée



Illustration by Glenn Wolff

A young man was walking with an agitated air about the railway station. He had blue glasses, and although he had not a cold in his head, he kept putting his handkerchief to his nose. In his left hand he held a little black bag containing, as I learnt later, a silk dressing gown and some Turkish trousers.

From time to time he went to the entrance and looked up and down the street; then he drew out his watch and studied the timetable. It was an hour before the train went, but there are some folk who are always afraid of being late. The train was not one of those that busy people take—few first-class carriages. And the hour it went was not that which allows businessmen to leave as soon as their work is done and arrive in time for dinner at their country houses. When the passengers began to show themselves, a Parisian would have seen by their air that they were farmers or little traders of the suburbs.

Still, each time anyone entered the station, each time a cab stopped at the gate, the heart of the young man in blue glasses swelled out like a balloon; his knees trembled; his bag almost fell from his hand; and his glasses nearly tumbled from his nose, on which, it might be said in passing, they were placed wrong side round.

It was still worse when, after a long wait, there appeared through a side door, coming precisely from the only point that was not subjected to continual observation, a woman clad in black with a thick veil over her face, holding in her hand a bag of brown morocco containing, as I afterwards discovered, a wonderful dressing gown and a pair of blue satin slippers. The woman and the young man came towards each other, looking to the right and the left, but never before them. They came together, touched hands, and stayed for some minutes without saying a word panting, trembling, overcome by one of those poignant emotions, for which I would give a hundred years of philosophic meditations.

"Léon," said the young woman—I have forgotten to say she was young and pretty—"Léon, what happiness! Never should I have known you in those blue glasses!"

"What joy!" said Léon. "I should have never recognized you under that black veil!"

"What joy!" she continued. "Let us get our seats quick. If the train started without us! . . ." (and she squeezed his arm) "Nobody guesses what is happening. At this moment I am with Clara and her husband, going to their country house, where I ought tomorrow to say goodbye! . . . And," she added laughing and lowering her

head, "it is just an hour since I went away with Clara, and tomorrow . . . after having passed the last evening with her . . ." (again she squeezed his arm) "tomorrow, in the morning, she will leave me at the station, where I shall find Ursule, whom I have sent on ahead to my aunt's. . . . Oh! I have thought out everything! Let us get our tickets. . . . It is impossible we should be found out! Oh! If they want to know our names at the end? I have already forgotten. . . ."

"Monsieur and Madame Duru."

"No! not Duru. There was a shoemaker at the boarding school with that name."

"Then, Dumont? . . ."

"Daumont!"

"Very well! But they will not question us!"

A bell rang, the door of the waiting room opened, and the young woman, always carefully veiled, darted into a carriage with her young companion. For the second time the bell rang, a porter shut the door of their compartment.

"We are alone!" they cried joyfully.

But at that very moment a man of about fifty, dressed all in black with a broad serious face, entered the carriage and settled down in a corner. The engine whistled and the train set off. The young couple, withdrawing as far as they could from their inconvenient neighbor, began to talk in whispers and, as an extra precaution, in English.

"Sir," said the other passenger in the same language and with a much purer English accent, "if you want to talk secrets, you had better not use English before me. I am an Englishman. Sorry to trouble you; but in the other compartment there was only one man, and as a matter of principle I never travel with a single man. He looked to me like a Judas. And this might have tempted him."

He pointed to his traveling bag that he had thrown on a cushion before him.

"If I can't sleep, I will read."

And he did loyally try to sleep. Opening his bag, he took out a traveling cap, put it on his head, and kept his eyes shut for some minutes. Then opening them with a movement of impatience, he groped in his bag for spectacles, then for a Greek book. At last he began to read very attentively. In getting the book out of the bag he had overturned many things, all thrown in anyhow. Among other articles he drew out was a pretty thick bundle of Bank of England notes, placed on the seat in front of him, and before putting

them back in the bag he showed them to the young man and asked him if he could change banknotes at a certain town.

"Probably. It is on the way to England," said Léon.

It was to this town that the young couple were going. There is a little hotel there, fairly clean, where travelers usually stay only on Saturday evening. It is pretended that the rooms are good, but the landlord and his servants are not far enough removed from Paris to keep a really good inn. Léon had come across the place some time before, when he was not wearing blue glasses, and after the account he gave of it, his sweetheart felt she would like to see it.

Besides, on this day, she was in such a frame of mind that the walls of a prison would have seemed to her full of charm if she had been shut in there with Léon. However, the train went on; the Englishman read his Greek without turning to look at his companions, who chatted in such whispers that only lovers could have understood. Perhaps I shall not surprise my readers by admitting that they were eloping lovers. And what was really deplorable was that they were not married, and there were great difficulties in the way of their marriage.

They reached their stopping place. The Englishman was the first to alight. While Léon was helping his sweetheart to get out of the carriage without showing her ankles, a man darted from a neighboring compartment on to the platform. He was pale, even yellow, with sunken, bloodshot eyes and a straggling beard—quite a criminal in appearance. His suit was clean but threadworn. His frock-coat once black, now grey at the elbows and at the back, was buttoned to the chin, probably to hide a waistcoat still shabbier. He came up to the Englishman, and in a very humble voice: "Uncle!" he said to him.

"Leave me alone, you wretch," cried the Englishman, his grey eyes lighting up with anger as he began to walk out of the station.

"Don't drive me to despair," said the other man in a tone at once sorrowful and threatening.

"Will you be good enough to look after my bag a moment?" said the old Englishman, throwing his bag at the feet of Léon.

Seizing the arm of the man who had accosted him, he pushed him in a corner where he hoped he would not be overheard, and there he spoke to him for a moment in a very harsh voice. Then, taking from his pocket some papers, he put them in the hand of the man who had called him uncle. The man took the papers without any thanks and almost at once went away and disappeared.

There is only one hotel in the town, so you must not be astonished that, at the end of a few minutes, all the characters in this truthful tale met again there. In France every traveler who has the luck to have a well-dressed woman on his arm is sure of obtaining the best room in all the hotel: thus is it established that we are the most polished nation in Europe.

If the room given to Léon was the best, it would be rash to conclude that it was excellent. There was a great wooden bed, with curtains of chintz on which was printed in violet the magical story of Pyramus and Thisbe. The walls were covered with figures. Unhappily, idle and indiscreet travelers had added mustaches and pipes to all the figures, male and female, and many foolish remarks in prose and verse were written in pencil on the sky and on the sea. Against this background hung several engravings: *Louis Philippe Swearing to the Charta of 1830*; *The First Meeting of Julie and Saint Preux*; the *Regrets* and the *Hope of Happiness* after Dubuffe. This room was called the Blue Room, because the two armchairs to the right and left of the fireplace were in Dutch velvet of this color. But for many years past they had been hidden under coverings of grey, glazed cloth with amaranth frills.

While the maids of the hotel gathered round the young lady and offered her their services, Léon, who was not wanting in good sense, even when in love, went to the kitchen to order dinner. He had to use all his eloquence and resort to bribery to get the promise of a private dinner, but greatly was he disconcerted when he learnt that in the big dining room adjoining the Blue Room the officers of the 3rd Hussars, who were about to relieve the officers of the 3rd Light Infantry, were joining the latter that very day in a farewell dinner that would take place with much cordiality.

The landlord swore by all his gods that, apart from the gaiety natural to all French soldiers, the Hussars and the Light Infantry were noted in the town for their gentleness and their good conduct, and that their presence would not inconvenience madame in the least, the custom of the officers being to end the dinner before midnight.

As Léon went back to the Blue Room, worried over this affair, he saw that the old Englishman had taken the room next to his. The door was open. The Englishman, sitting before a table on which were placed a glass and a bottle, looked at the ceiling with deep attention, as though he were counting the flies that were walking there.

"What does it matter who our neighbors are?" said Léon to him-

self. "The Englishman will soon be drunk, and the soldiers will have gone away before midnight."

In entering the Blue Room his first care was to make sure that the communicating doors were properly closed and locked. On the side of the Englishman there was a double door; the wall was thick. On the side of the Hussars the partition was thinner, but the door had a lock and key. After all, it was a more effectual barrier against curiosity than the curtains of a cab are, and how many people think they are isolated from the world in a cab!

Certainly the richest imagination cannot picture a more complete happiness than that of two young lovers who, after long waiting, find themselves alone, far from the eyes of jealous and curious people, so that they can relate at leisure their bygone troubles and relish the delights of a perfect meeting. But the devil always finds some means of pouring his drop of bitterness into the cup of felicity. While eating a pretty poor dinner in the Blue Room, composed of some dishes stolen from the banquet of the officers, Léon and his lady had to suffer a good deal from the conversation that those gentlemen held in the neighboring room. Their talk turned on matters that had nothing to do with strategy and tactics, and I cannot possibly report it.

It was a long string of coarse stories, accompanied by outbursts of laughter in which it was sometimes difficult for our lovers not to take part. Léon's sweetheart was not a prude, but there are some things a woman does not like to hear, even in company with the man she loves. The situation became more and more embarrassing, and when the officers were beginning their dessert, Léon went down to the kitchen to beg the landlord to tell the gentlemen there was a sick lady in the next room and to ask them to have the politeness to make a little less noise.

The landlord, as always happens in army dinners, was quite flurried, and did not know what to say. For at the moment when Léon gave him the message for the officers, a waiter asked him for champagne for the Hussars, and a maid for a bottle of port for the Englishman.

"I told him we had no port," she added.

"You are a fool. I keep every kind of wine. I will find him his bottle of port! Bring me a bottle of ratafia, a bottle of fifteen, and a decanter of brandy."

After having manufactured the port in a turn of the hand, the landlord entered the dining room and gave the message from Léon. It first excited a furious storm. Then a bass voice that dominated

all the others demanded what kind of woman they had for a neighbor.

"My faith, messieurs," said the landlord, "she is very pretty and she is very shy. Marie Jeanne says she has a wedding ring. So it may be a bride who has come here for her honeymoon, as they sometimes do."

"A bride!" shouted forty voices. "She must come and drink with us. We will toast her health and teach her husband his duties!"

At these words there was a great clanking of spurs, and our couple trembled, thinking that their room was going to be taken by storm. But suddenly a voice stayed the movement. Evidently it was one of the chiefs that spoke. He reproached the officers with their impoliteness and told them to sit down, and speak decently without shouting. Then he added some words in too low a voice to be heard in the Blue Room. They were received with deference, but not without exciting a certain restrained hilarity.

From this moment there was a comparative silence in the officers' room, and our loving pair blessed the salutary effects of discipline and began to talk together with more ease. But after so much upset, it took some time to recover those tender emotions which anxieties, the fatigues of traveling, and above all the coarse merriment of their neighbors had greatly troubled. At their age, however, the thing is not very difficult, and they soon forgot all the unpleasantness of their adventurous expedition and began to think only of its pleasures.

They fancied they had made peace with the Hussars. Alas! it was only a truce. The moment when they were least expecting it, when they were thousands of leagues away from this sublunary world, behold! twenty-four bugles sustained by several trombones poured out the air known to French soldiers, "Ours Is the Victory!" How could anyone resist such a tempest? The poor lovers were much to be pitied.

No, not very much. For in the end the officers came out of the dining room, defiling before the door of the Blue Room with much clank of sabres and spurs and shouting one after the other, "Good-night, madame, the bride."

Then all sound ceased. No, I am mistaken. The Englishman came out into the corridor and cried:

"Waiter, bring me another bottle of that same port!"

Calmness settled at last on the little inn. The night was sweet, the moon at full. From time immemorial lovers have delighted to look at our satellite. Léon and his lady opened their window, that

looked on a little garden, and breathed with joy the cool air, fragrant with the scent of clematis. They did not remain at the window very long. A man was walking in the garden, his head bowed, his arms crossed, a cigar in his mouth. Léon thought he recognized the nephew of the Englishman who loved the good wine of Portugal.

I hate useless details, and besides I am not obliged to tell the reader all that took place, hour by hour, in the inn. So I will only say that the candle, burning on the mantelpiece in the Blue Room, was more than half consumed when, in the bedroom of the Englishman, hitherto silent, a strange noise was heard, such as a heavy body might produce in its fall. And with this noise there mingled a sort of cracking, not less strange, followed by a stifled cry and several indistinct words, resembling a curse. The young couple in the Blue Room were startled. Perhaps they had been aroused by the fall, for on both of them the mysterious noise produced an almost sinister impression.

"It is our Englishman dreaming," said Léon, trying to smile. He wished to reassure his companion, but he shivered involuntarily. Two or three minutes afterwards, a door was opened in the corridor, very carefully it seemed, then it was shut very quietly. Someone could be heard walking slowly and uneasily, who, to all appearance, was trying to pass without being heard.

"What a cursed place!" cried Léon.

"Ah, it is like heaven! . . ." said the young lady, letting her head fall on Léon's shoulder. "I am so sleepy . . ."

She sighed and fell asleep again almost at once. But Léon was worried, and his imagination began to dwell on several things that, in another frame of mind, he would have passed over. The sinister figure of the Englishman's nephew was recalled to his memory. There was hatred in the glance he gave his uncle whilst speaking to him with humility, no doubt because he was asking for money. What could be easier than for a man, still young and vigorous and desperate besides, to climb from the garden to the window of the next room? . . . Moreover, he was staying in the inn, since he was walking in the garden at night. Perhaps . . . even probably . . . indubitably, he knew that there was a thick bundle of banknotes in his uncle's bag. . . . And that heavy blow, like a club falling on a bald head! . . . that stifled cry! . . . that frightful oath, and then the creeping steps afterwards! The nephew had the air of a murderer. . . . But a hotel full of officers is not a good place for a murderer. No doubt this Englishman, like a prudent man, had locked his door, especially knowing what sort of fellow was

hanging about. He mistrusted him, since he did not want to go up to him with his bag in his hand. . . . But why think of such hideous things when you are so happy?

That was what Léon said to himself. In the middle of his thoughts, which I refrain from analyzing at length and which came to him almost as confused as the visions of a dream, he had his eyes fixed mechanically on the communicating door between the Blue Room and the Englishman's room.

In France the doors do not shut well. Between this one and the floor there was an opening of nearly half an inch. Suddenly, through this opening, scarcely lighted by the reflection from the waxed floor, there appeared something blackish, flat, and resembling the blade of a knife, for the edge, touched by the light from the candle, showed a thin brilliant line. This moved slowly in the direction of a little slipper of blue satin, thrown indiscreetly a little way from the door. Was it some insect like a centipede? . . . No; it was not an insect, it had no fixed shape. . . . Two or three brown trails, each with its line of light at the edge, penetrate into the Blue Room. Their movement quickens, owing to the slope of the floor; they advance rapidly, and begin to touch the little slipper. No more doubt! It is a liquid, and its color can now be seen distinctly by the light of the candle—it is blood! And while Léon, motionless, stared with horror at the frightful thing, the young lady slept on peacefully, and her regular breath warmed the neck and shoulder of the terrified man.

The care that Léon had taken to order dinner as soon as he arrived at the inn is sufficient to prove that he had a good head on his shoulders and was able to look ahead. He did not belie his character on this occasion. He made no movement, and all the force of his mind bent in an effort to come to some decision in the presence of the frightful misfortune that threatened him.

I imagine that most of my readers, and especially my lady readers, full themselves with the spirit of heroism, will blame Léon for his inactivity and his lack of courage. He ought, I shall be told, to have run to the Englishman's room and arrested the murderer. At the very least, he should have pulled his bell and aroused the people of the inn. To this I must answer, first, that in French inns the bell rope is only an ornament in the bedrooms: there is no apparatus in metal attached to the other end of the cord. I will also add, respectfully but firmly, that, if it is wrong to let an Englishman die in the next room, it is not at all praiseworthy to sacrifice to an old foreigner the young and pretty woman who is sleeping with her

head on your shoulder. What would have happened if Léon had shouted out and awakened everybody in the inn? Gendarmes, a magistrate, and his clerk would soon have arrived. Before asking him what he had seen or heard, these gentlemen are so inquisitive by profession that they would have started by asking Léon:

"What is your name? Where are your papers? And madame? Why are you staying together in this Blue Room? You will both have to appear before the court of assize and give evidence that, on such a date, at such an hour at night, you have been witnesses to such and such things."

Now, it was precisely this idea of the magistrate and the police that first presented itself to the mind of Léon. There are some problems in life that are difficult to solve. Is it better to let an unknown foreigner be murdered, or lose and bring dishonor upon a beloved woman? Léon did what most men would have done in his place. He did not stir. With his eyes fixed on the blue slipper, and the little red stream that touched it, he remained for some time as though he was fascinated, while a cold sweat came on his forehead and his heart beat in his breast enough to break it open. A crowd of horrible thoughts and odd images beset him, and an inner voice said to him every minute, "In an hour everything will be known, and it is your fault!" However, through continually asking himself, "Whatever shall I do in this affair?" a man often ends by finding some rays of hope.

"If we leave this accursed hotel," said Léon to himself, "before they discover what has happened in the next room, perhaps we shall be able to cover up our traces. Nobody knows us here. They have only seen me in blue glasses, and they have never seen her without her veil. We are only two steps from the station, and in an hour we shall be far away from this town."

Then, as he had well studied the timetable in arranging his elopement, he remembered that a train to Paris passed at eight o'clock. Soon after that, he and his lady would be lost in the immensity of that city that hides so many criminals. Who could there discover two innocent persons? But if anyone entered the Englishman's room before eight o'clock? All the problem was there.

Well convinced there was nothing else he could do, he made a desperate effort to shake off the drowsiness that had long been gaining on him. But at his first movement his companion awoke and kissed him. At the touch of his icy cheek she gave a little cry.

"What is the matter?" she said anxiously. "Your forehead is like marble."

"It is nothing," he replied in a shaky voice. "I heard a noise in the next room."

Getting out of bed, he took the blue slipper away, and placed an armchair before the communicating door so as to hide from his sweetheart the frightful stream which, having now ceased to spread, formed a large pool on the floor. Then he opened the door and listened in the corridor. He even dared to try the door of the Englishman's room. It was locked. There was already some stir in the inn. The day was dawning. Some stablemen were grooming the horses in the yard, and on the second floor, an officer was coming downstairs with clanking spurs. He was going to see that the horses were properly looked after.

Léon returned to the Blue Room, and with circumlocutions and euphemisms and all the precautions that love could suggest, he told his lady in what situation they were.

It was dangerous to remain, and dangerous to go too soon, and still more dangerous to wait in the inn until the discovery was made in the next room. It is useless to describe the fright caused by this information; the tears that followed it; the wild proposals that were made; how many times the two unhappy creatures threw themselves in each other's arms, saying, "Pardon me!" "Pardon me!" Each blamed themselves. They promised to die together, for the young lady was sure they would be found guilty of the murder of the Englishman, and as they were not certain they would be permitted to kiss on the scaffold, they stifled each other with embraces, and watered each other with their tears.

At last, having said many absurdities and many loving things, they recognized, in the midst of a thousand kisses, that Léon's plan of departing by the eight o'clock train was the only practical one. But there were still two mortal hours to pass. At each step in the corridor they trembled in all their limbs. Each squeak of a boot announced to them the arrival of the police. Their little luggage was packed in the twinkling of an eye. The young lady wished to burn the blue slipper in the fireplace, but Léon took it and, after wiping it on the under bedclothes, he kissed it and put it in his pocket. He was surprised to find it had a vanilla fragrance: his lady liked the same perfume as the Empress Eugénie.

Already everybody was awake in the inn. They could hear the waiters laughing, the maids singing; the soldiers brushing the officers' clothes. Seven o'clock chimed. Léon wished to get his love to take a cup of coffee, but she declared her throat was so tight that she would die if she tried to drink anything. Léon, putting on

his blue glasses, went down to pay his bill. The landlord begged his pardon for the noise that had been made. He still could not understand it, for the officers were always so quiet. Léon assured him he had heard nothing, and had slept excellently.

"Now your neighbor in the other room," continued the landlord, "cannot have inconvenienced you, for he has not made much noise. I wager he is still sleeping like the dead."

Léon leant heavily against the desk to prevent himself from falling, and his lady, who had resolved to come with him, clutched his arm, pressing her veil over her eyes.

"It is an English lord," went on the landlord pitilessly. "He always wants the best of everything. Ah, he is a gentleman! But all the English are not like him. There is another here who is a mean rascal. He finds everything too dear—the room and the dinner. He wanted me to give him a hundred and fifty francs for a Bank of England note of five pounds. But is it good? Here, sir, you ought to know that, for I heard you speaking English with madame. Is it a good one?"

He held out a five pound banknote. On one of the corners was a little red stain that Léon understood.

"I think it is quite good," he said in a strangled voice.

"Oh, you have plenty of time," continued the landlord. "The train is not due till eight o'clock, and it is always late. Won't you sit down, madame? You seem tired."

At this moment a plump maid entered.

"Some warm water, quick," she said, "for the tea of milord! Get a sponge also! He has broken his bottle of port and all his room is flooded."

Léon let himself fall into a chair; his companion did the same. A strong desire to laugh took them both, and they had some trouble not to give way. The young lady shook him joyfully by the hand.

"Decidedly," said Léon to the landlord, "we will not go till the afternoon. Prepare a really good lunch for us at twelve."

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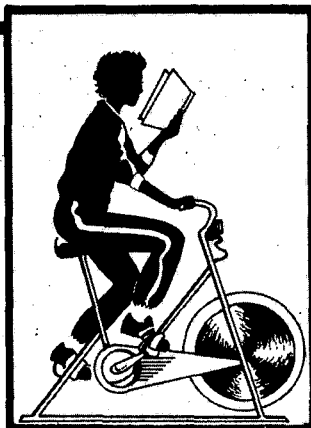


Illustration by Sheila Smith

The best book I have read this year—perhaps in several years—is Anne Perry's **The Face of a Stranger** (Fawcett, \$17.95, 328 pp). This is *not* an entry in her Victorian series about Charlotte Pitt and her policeman husband, but it remains Victorian in time and setting. The central character, who would be loath to call himself a hero, is Peeler William Monk. He awakens, injured, in a hospital, and has no memory of what put him there, or even of who he is. He manages to conceal the latter problem, at least for a while, from his compatriots and superiors because it soon becomes obvious that he is not liked, even hated. And one who dislikes him the most and would like to see him fail is his boss, Runcorn, who has assigned him to discover the murderer of a popular veteran of the Crimean war. Monk must solve this murder without stepping on any influential toes, while solving his own private mystery as well. Again Ms. Perry has introduced a strong Victorian woman in the person of Hester Latterly, a woman less interested in convention than in improving conditions for the sick and wounded in the military hospitals of the Crimean sector. The characterization of Monk, his assistant Mr. Evan, and the family and friends affected by the murder are excellent, and the plotting is fascinating.

Catering to Nobody by Diane Mott Davidson (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 266 pp) is a delightfully witty story about "Goldy" Bear's

new catering business; her obnoxious ex-husband who, among other things, accuses her of attempted murder; and the policeman, Tom Schulz, who investigates the poisoning of her ex-father-in-law and falls for Goldy's cooking. Lots of recipes, Aspen, Colorado, scenery, and an interesting motivation for murder make this a promising first novel.

A first mystery by an author already established in the Regency romance genre might lead the reader to suspect a merging of the two genres. But Sheila Simonson has instead presented a creditable contemporary bibliomystery in **Larkspur** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 234 pp). Lark Dailey, junior college basketball coach, owner of Larkspur Books, and daughter of a distinguished lady poet, is invited to a July Fourth bash at another poet's retreat in the Northern California mountains. At the party, the poet is poisoned—with an extract of larkspur. Lark's lover, Jay, the CID officer in the county, is also present and leads the investigation. Suspects begin to die, one by one, each with an interesting gimmick. Lark, because of her inside knowledge of the suspects, endangers herself in an attempt to solve the murders before her mother can be added to the list.

Carlton Stowers has written a number of nonfiction books, one of which (*Careless Whispers*) won the 1986 Edgar for fact crime. **Innocence Lost** (Pocket Books, \$18.95, 291 pp) is a poignant tale of the murder of an undercover police officer in a small Texas town near Stowers' home. He recreates the events leading up to the murder, characterizes the police officers and the murder suspects well, and follows the crime from commission through trial and sentencing. Stowers' feeling toward the police officer he had never met and the townspeople he grew to know and respect are ably presented in this impressive true crime book.

The winner of the fourth annual St. Martin's/Private Eye Writers of America "Best First Private Eye Novel Contest," Janet Dawson's **Kindred Crimes** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 260 pp) investigates the effect on three children of being raised in an abusive, dysfunctional family. The son is convicted of shooting his parents; a daughter changes her name and runs from her past; a second daughter becomes a porn star. All enter the scene when private investigator Jeri (short for Jerusha) Howard takes on a missing person case for a distraught husband from Los Gatos, California. Well drawn, sympathetic characters, an excellent sense of the Northern California setting, and a good puzzle that plays fair.

Robert Barnard has created a family with the worst possible

recommendations—and they are about to move into a relatively well-to-do neighborhood in **A City of Strangers** (Scribners, \$18.95, 287 pp). When the dreadful head of the household, Jack Phelan, wins the pools, he decides to move up in the world, taking with him his slatternly wife, his prostitute daughter, and his petty thief son. The baby, who hasn't really had time to acquire a criminal record, is still pretty disgusting, and only twelve-year-old Michael has any redeeming social value. The neighbors are aghast—what can they do to rid themselves of the Phelans and maintain the value of their property? Murder? All are suspect when the Phelans' residence catches fire and Jack is killed, especially when the fire appears to have been arson.

Veronica S. Pierce introduces "the tall Miss Minikin Small" in **The Chinese Oxymoron** (Council Oak, \$14.95, 188 pp). Miss Small has returned to a recently inherited townhouse in Manhattan—one she intends to restore and sell—when a man is killed in her foyer by two Orientals. The man turns out to have been a scientist who has been missing; along with the plans to a secret weapon, for weeks, and his final words to Minikin are a clue to the mystery of the lost plans. She, without the approval of the large cadre of New York City and federal police assigned to the case, takes it on herself to find the thief (and murderer).

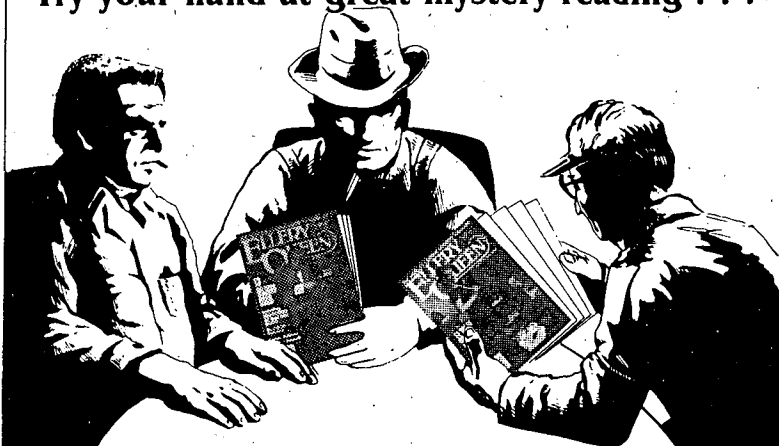
The Gift Horse's Mouth is the seventh Jimmy Flannery mystery by Robert Campbell (Pocket Books Hardcover, \$17.95, 100 pp). "If you think a political machine's an organization what can deliver the votes for a candidate no matter how bad he or she may be, then I suppose there ain't a machine left in any major city in the country. If you think, like I think, that a machine's a way for the people to get a little room at the public trough, then the machine's alive and it'll always be alive because there's always going to be somebody who can't help themselves, who ain't got a clue how to go about it, who're going to go to somebody like me for help." So speaks sewer inspector and precinct captain Flannery just before he asks for the position of committeeman of the 27th Ward in Chicago. And just before he gets involved in the investigation of the death of Goldie Hanrahan, the former secretary to a machine boss. This is a fast read, with Flannery's first-person narration a joy. His whole personality—he's an honest politician who won't even kiss a pretty girl because he is married and his wife is pregnant, and he's an Irishman who doesn't drink—is clearly presented. If political machines were populated by Jimmy Flannerys, it is no wonder they flourished in the impersonal urban climates Campbell describes.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



A film whose title is **Misery** runs the risk of being savaged by gleeful reviewers writing about audiences suffering in misery or about what an appropriate name the movie has. Fortunately, this is far from the case for the Rob Reiner-directed treatment of a Stephen King novel.

Misery is a genuine edge-of-the-seater in which a bestselling romance novelist becomes the unwilling captive of an obsessed fan.

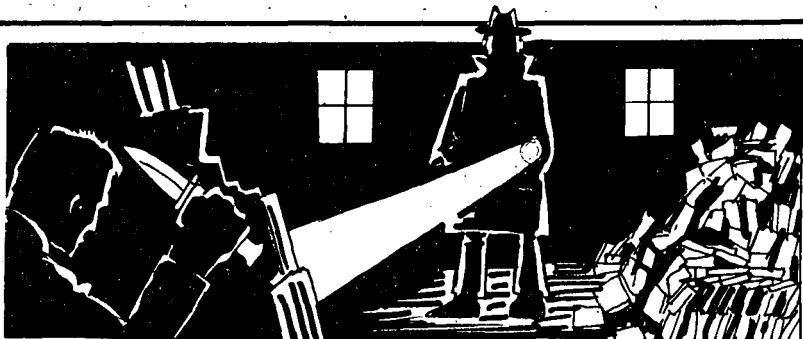
James Caan plays writer Paul Sheldon, best known for his long-running series about romantic heroine Misery Chastain. Like a character in a movie serial who gets into trouble each week, only to be saved the next time out, Misery has more lives than a cat.

But Sheldon has tired of his popular creation. "I never meant

it to become my life," he tells his New York agent (Lauren Bacall). To him, writing books has become a business more than an art. He wants out of business and into art. So he takes the plunge and kills Misery, and off he goes to an isolated lodge in the Colorado Rockies to work on a different kind of book.

Sheldon follows his usual procedure when the book is completed. He lights a Lucky Strike, opens a bottle of Dom Perignon, and toasts his latest. What happens next, however, is anything but usual.

An auto accident leaves him broken, unconscious, and buried with his car in a snow drift many feet deep. Sheldon winds up a victim of his writing success as well: His rescuer, a nurse, is enamored of him and his fictional heroine. So much



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so that she refuses to let him go when she finds he's killed her best friend, Misery.

The blizzard that left the author hurt has also left the telephone lines down and the roads impassable—or so nurse Annie Wilks (Kathy Bates) says. He is forced to stay put.

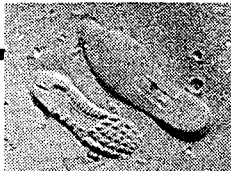
"You've got a lot of recovering to do," Annie tells him, "and I'm honored to have you do it in my home." Her house, on an isolated tract, suggests her teenage mentality. She keeps scrapbooks, collects little ceramic animals, and listens to Liberace records all day long. With the still-recovering Sheldon at her mercy, she orders him to write a new tale of Misery in which he brings her back to life. And, playing for time, the writer tries to do so.

After his agent phones the local sheriff (Richard Farnsworth), the police begin to search for Sheldon. When his wrecked car is found, they assume he has died. The wily old sheriff, however, believes the writer may have escaped his icy tomb, and with his deputy-sheriff wife (Frances Sternhagen) he tries

to unearth clues by reading Misery books and following every possible lead.

In the meantime, the battle of wills between the author and his captor is being played out in fine fashion, like a chess match. Sheldon can outsmart Annie, but she, of course, has a physical advantage over him. She is unpredictable, too. As methodical as the injured author is in plotting to free himself, the nurse can destroy his work with a painful swat against his broken legs or an injection of sleep-inducing drugs. On the other hand, she might bring him breakfast in bed. James Caan performs admirably in a physically demanding role, but Kathy Bates, as his obsessed keeper, is the star of this film. Richard Farnsworth and Frances Sternhagen, as the loving husband and wife law enforcement team, offer an excellent counterpoint to the relationship between the two main characters. The peaceful outdoor Colorado scenery also offers a good contrast to the claustrophobic setting inside Annie's house.

THE STORY THAT WON



The November Mysterious by Michael C. McPherson of Canada. Honorable mentions ston, Ontario, Canada; Perryigan; Thomas Dengler, APO, New York; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; and S. Jean Wright of Kent, Washington.

Photograph contest was won Fort McMurray, Alberta, go to Susan Hogan of Brin- E. Pariseau of Owosso, Mich-

THE LAST LAUGH by Michael C. McPherson

Detective Finley looked down at the prints in the sand and said, "Did you ever hear that saying, if the shoe fits don't wear it?"

His partner Mac Moberly eyed him suspiciously. "Are you sure that's how it goes?"

"No," Finley smiled, "but it sounds good. Anyway, what do you make of these two prints, Mac?"

"Somebody's conning us real good. Maybe the perp, maybe not."

"Most definitely our man," confirmed Finley with a nod. "We'll order in a backhoe, start digging right here."

Mac eyed him strangely. "You figger this is where Happy Face buried the diamonds?"

Finley grinned and looked around. "This is an isolated spot. Happy Face always paints himself to look like a clown. He knew we were on his tail and that the diamonds were hotter than the core of Mount Vesuvius. He buried them here, all right. Except things didn't quite work out."

"What about catching up with him?"

"We already have," beamed Finley. "Those footprints aren't footprints at all. They're our man's feet."

"How—?"

"It's simple," said Finley. "Happy Face wore weird shoes just like those. My guess is, he tried digging a hole with his hands, a very deep hole. When he was done, he took the box of diamonds and leaned into the hole, couldn't get himself out." Finley glanced toward the ocean. "That's when the tide came in and buried him over."

Mac laughed for over an hour. He stopped though when the backhoe proved Finley to be right.

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ASIAN WOMEN desire friendship, marriage! Free details, photos! **SUNSHINE INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE**, Box 5500-HF, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii 96745. (808) 325-7707.

MEET USA singles by direct phone/mail. M. Fischer Club, Box 2152-V, Loves Park, IL 61130.

PROFITABLE OCCUPATIONS

HUNDREDS dollars for your thoughts. Curl up with a good book. Get paid while reading. 305-480-4948. 24 Hours.

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MELT in your Mouth Dessert. Great surprise for parties, guests. \$3.00 Sase: Dessert, P.O. Box 50153, Provo, UT 84605.

RECIPES—Cont'd

HEAVENLY POUND CAKE - Secret ingredient! \$2.00 Sase: Evans, P.O. Box 573675, Murray, Utah 84157-3675.

TEN Tasty chicken recipes. Send \$5/Sase to: A. Roger, 384 Adirondack Drive, Farmingville, NY 11738.

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POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME radio programs. Mysteries, adventure, suspense, science fiction, comedies. Classic tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

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SAVE money! Detailed info including toll-free numbers for budget motels, car rentals, airlines, etc. \$2.00 SSAE to: Chandler, Box 576, New York, NY 10028.

CRUISE LOVERS BOOKLET. All you want to know about Top 50 cruise ships, special rates bulletin included. Mail \$6.00: CLA, P.O. Box 862278, Marietta, GA 30062.

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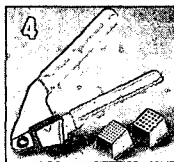
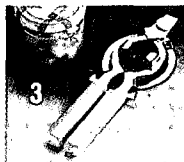
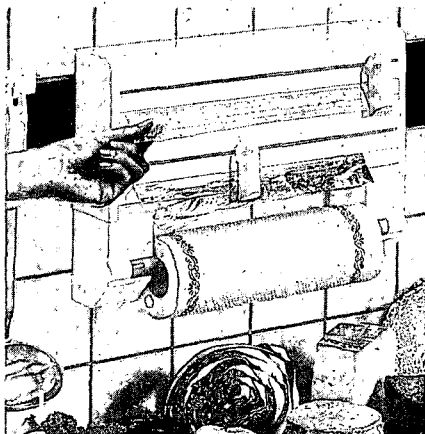
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For further information write to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager,
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▼ PERFECT KITCHEN ROLL DISPENSER AND 3 PIECE KITCHEN TOOL KIT

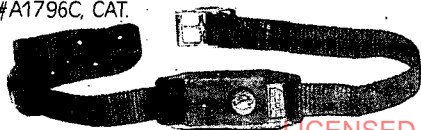
Do kitchen wraps have you all thumbs? Then THE Perfect Kitchen Dispenser is for you. It's the only one that, cut after cut, holds the roll end ready to be picked up and pulled out for the next sheet. The two "neat sheet" cutters feature stainless steel blades for cutting that's a cinch. Holds standard rolls of cling-film, aluminum foil, or wax paper plus a paper towel holder. Simple front loading procedure makes replacement a snap. Sleek white and grey design fits any decor. But there's more: it comes with state of the art hand can opener, super strong jar and bottle opener, and impressive garlic/onion press with 2 inserts for fine and coarse pressing. So get a handle on kitchen wraps and treat yourself. **\$69.98 (\$8.50) #A1954.**



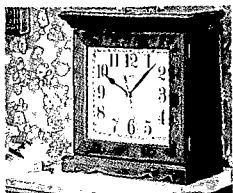
1. DISPENSER
2. HAND CAN OPENER
3. JAR AND BOTTLE OPENER
4. GARLIC/ONION PRESS

▼ DO FLEAS HAVE EARS?

The Microtech Flea Collar with its blasts of ultrasound creates such an intolerable environment that fleas and ticks abandon their pet hosts within 5 days. It is designed specifically for fleas and focuses on a 4' zone of protection, the Microtech Collar outperforms other kinds of ultrasonic pest chasers. A vast improvement over poison powders and chemical collars. Works on cats or dogs. Adjustable 19" collar fits 97% of dogs and runs for 6-8 months on 2 lithium cells (included). You can afford to see if it *really* works because you are fully protected by our guarantee — you have nothing to lose but the fleas! **\$44.98 (\$3.00) #A1796, DOG; \$44.98 (\$3.00) #A1796C, CAT.**

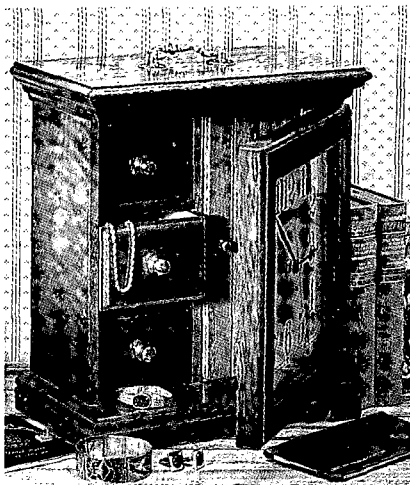


▼ A TIMELY SECRET



Do you have valuables or other important items that need a secure and secret hiding place? Why not store them in an elegant 17th

century reproduction of a mantelpiece clock! Handcrafted in cherry, and accented with solid brass, the clock has large antique style numbers and features a quartz powered movement. This lovely accent piece measures 13" (h) x 11 3/4" (w) x 6 1/2" (d) and will grace any dresser, desk or mantel. The clock face opens to reveal 3 fabric lined drawers and a larger (10" x 4" x 3 3/4"), compartment, complete with key. Beauty and security in one lovely piece—what a timely idea! **\$99.98** (\$8.00) #A1917.



▼ TEACH AN OLD LAMP NEW TRICKS

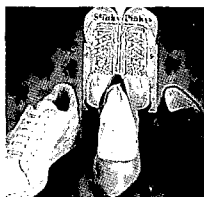


Any lamp that takes a standard bulb can be updated with the Touchtronic dimmer. No rewiring needed—just screw into lamp socket. Then your touch on any metal part becomes the "switch"—touch once for low light, again for medium, a third time for full wattage. Handy when you're entering a dark room, great at bedside and a real comfort to the arthritic or the ill. You'll save time, money and electricity—no

more 3-way bulbs to buy and you pay for only as much light as you need. U.L. listed, one-year factory warranty. **\$15.98** (\$4.00) #A1700. 2 for **\$27.98** (\$6.00) #A17002.



▼ FRESHENED FOOTWEAR



Just put a Stinky Pinky "sock" in each shoe and overnight odor is gone, absorbed by the special blend of all natural earth materials. Works in running shoes, sneakers, boots, leather shoes, anything that goes on your feet. And keeps on working, too—just put Stinky Pinkys out in the sun for a day every three months or so to restore their odor-catching ability. Three pairs of Stinky Pinkys, enough for 6 shoes or boots, costs **\$19.98** (\$4.00) #13263.

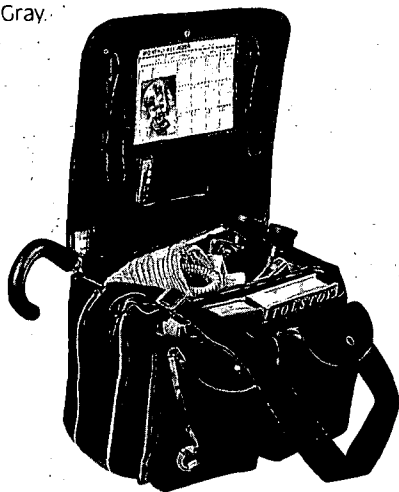
TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in () payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 031AH; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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▽ EVERYTHING BAG

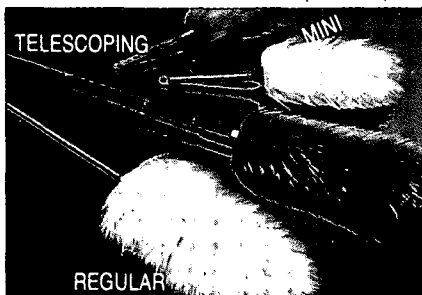
People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **\$24.98** (\$4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.



TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in () payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 031 AH, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or COD orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund—Allow 30 days for delivery.

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▽ LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters. **\$22.98** (\$4.00) #A1870.

▽ TALKING ALARM CLOCK



Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½"x3"x4". **\$27.98** (\$4.50) #A1916.